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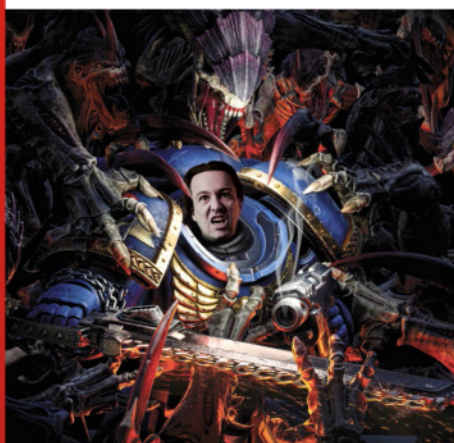
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"IT ENTHUSES ME GREATLY TO PRESENT THIS LANDMARK ISSUE"



Very few magazines get anywhere near printing 400 issues, so it enthuses me greatly to present this landmark issue of PC Gamer magazine. For over 30 years PC Gamer has been reporting on the most exciting new PC games, hardware and culture, and doing so with authority and plenty of humour, too.

And, talking of games to get

excited for, *Space Marine 2* looks like that dream title fans have been patiently waiting decades for. I've played it, and feel no game to date has presented the epic, universe at war scope of WH40K better. For the Emperor!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



MORGAN PARK
Twitter
@MorganRPark

This month
Installed a series of portals in PC Gamer Towers and kept jumping through them butt naked.



WES FENLON
Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month
Managed a team of weirdo Japanese mascots, including a porn-loving cat and a giant severed finger.



TYLER WILDE
Twitter
@tyler_wilde

This month
Pondered if he was actually Arthur Dent. Made a reservation at a certain restaurant.



JODY MACGREGOR
Twitter
@jodymacgregor

This month
Invited people to stay awhile and listen, as he explained why *Diablo IV* is actually good now.

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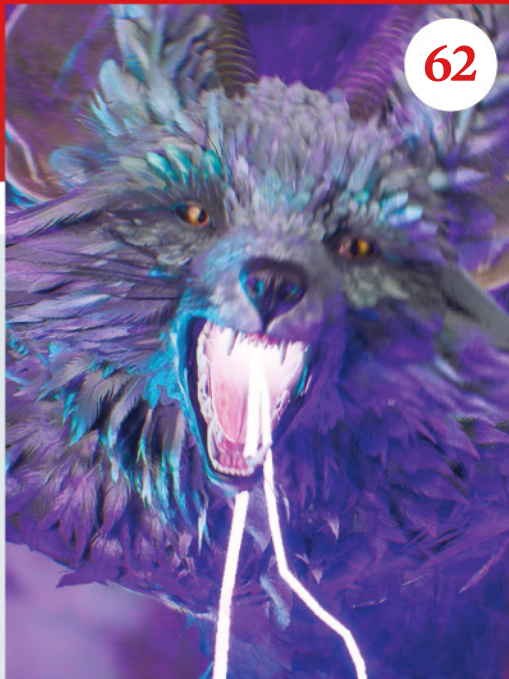
Editor Rob travels to Focus HQ in Paris, France, to go hands-on with the epic new Warhammer 40,000 game, *Space Marine 2*. Spoiler: it's epic and explosively awesome!

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MONITOR

NEW DEVELOPMENT



Valve is just Gabe and around 300 of his closest friends.

WE HAPPY FEW

VALVE is a fraction of the size of megacorps it goes toe-to-toe with

Ever wonder how many people it takes to make Steam? Barely any, it turns out. Documents from an antitrust suit against Valve show that the company consisted of 336 employees in 2021. That's a fraction of the size of most big game publishers, even as Steam continues to shape PC gaming as a whole.

The documents originate from Wolfire Games' 2021 lawsuit arguing that Steam constitutes an unfair monopoly on PC digital distribution. The documents remain partially redacted, and were likely meant to

have all the juicy details fully blacked out – a surprisingly common error in the US legal system that leads to sensitive data being made public.

The Verge has a full chart of the year-by-year number of employees and departmental payroll changes at Valve. The chart confirms prior reporting that the overall headcount

at the company has remained pretty stable for the last ten years – back in 2016 we reported that the company had around 360 employees, while Wikipedia quoted the company as having 330 in 2013.

IT'S HOW YOU USE IT

Here's the topline from 2021: of those 336 employees, 79 directly worked on Steam, while a whopping 181 remained in the 'Games' department – pretty much the reverse of what I expected, given Steam's importance to company profits and how rarely Valve releases new games. There were just 41 employees working on hardware development at that time,

THE DOCUMENTS ORIGINATE FROM WOLFIRE GAMES' 2021 LAWSUIT

BLUESCREENS

TECH DISASTER



A bad day at the office for Microsoft and CrowdStrike, as a borked update to the latter's Falcon software led to MS servers falling victim to the blue screen of death. The problem's since been fixed, but a mere 1% of Windows machines caused mass disruption on a global scale. ■ **AE**

FURRY HACK ATTACK

FURSUIT COLLAR CRIME



'Stranger than fiction' accurately describes the fact that a furry hacktivist cartel of cyber-criminals called Nullbulge swiped around 1.1 TiB of data from Disney recently – unfortunately, the truth is also less of a laughing matter, since a trove of personal data on employees was also caught in the cyber-net and distributed without mercy. ■ **HR**

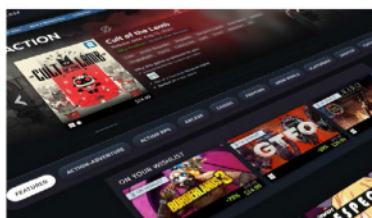


STEAMY

'CABARET CLUB' ICED



Want to hire a nice lady to play *Overwatch* with you? Maybe even fall asleep on voice chat for a reasonable fee? Well, tough luck: the Twitter account for an 'Overwatch cabaret club' offering those services got shut down. Good news, though: an Apex version immediately took its place. ■ **JW**



TOP: So understaffed that the president had to deliver Decks by hand.

ABOVE: Valve juggles hardware and software despite its minuscule size.

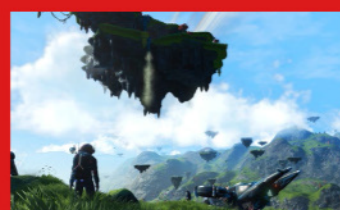
right on the eve of the Steam Deck's launch, and the remaining 35 employees were in admin.

To put those numbers into perspective, here are some points of comparison: Microsoft Gaming consists of around 20,000 employees, Ubisoft has 19,000, and EA has nearly 14,000. At its size, Valve is really a lot closer to companies like Naughty Dog (around 400) and BioWare (around 270) than it is to the other behemoths currently responsible for shaping the games industry landscape.

Wolfire Games actually criticised this limited headcount in its lawsuit, arguing that Valve "devotes a minuscule percentage of its revenue to maintaining and improving the Steam Store." Last year, a People Make Games report citing interviews with anonymous former Valve employees suggested that Valve's 'flat' corporate structure hurts its employees.

Even with these issues in mind, it's hard not to be impressed with the company's sheer effectiveness, managing one of the core pillars of PC gaming in Steam and revolutionizing handheld PC gaming with the Steam Deck. And whenever the company does get around to releasing a new game (or even just updating an existing one) it's always an event. Maybe Valve just needs another hundred or so devs to finally get around to *Half-Life 3*? ■ **Ted Litchfield**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Endless Sky

No *Man's Sky* update adds stuff fans had "almost given up hope on".

Videogames? Big deal

The voice of Igon, *Elden Ring*'s angriest NPC, had no idea gaming was huge before he got the job.

Cyrodill in Russian?

More than ten years after its creation, massive Russian *Oblivion* mod *Citadel of Madness* has been translated into English.

What a heist

Rockstar finally let you claim earnings via your phone in *GTA Online*. Then it paywalled the feature.

You shall not Pass

Microsoft suddenly jacked up prices on Game Pass.

Solo Mode

Obsidian says it thought about *BGIII*-style multiplayer for *Avowed*, but it didn't have experience like Larian's to pull it off.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

It should be no surprise to learn that *The Spy* cherishes information. *The Spy* strives to gather it, yes, but also to protect it from the prying eyes of everyone except the PC Gamer readership. The problem, *The Spy* has learned, is that everything is information, and it's being shared all the damn time. Documents are information. Pictures are information. People are information – the thoughts in their head, the DNA in their body. It was bad enough when we invented conversation – direct transfers of information interceptable by passing strangers. But then social media came along and made the conversation public, permanent and global.

Consider the case study of one particular Pinterest user. This person probably thought nothing of filling up their boards with costume designs, weapons and desert landscapes – a collage of striking imagery, presumably collected as inspiration and reference for some creative project. Only, oh no, those boards are now being shared across Reddit, its users scouring the images for potential clues. And, oh dear, now a website is using that discussion as the basis for a news post. They've even run it with the headline, "*Elders Scrolls 6* setting revealed by artist's Pinterest account."

Let's assume they're correct; that it is the account of someone working on *The Elder Scrolls VI*, and they are using it as a mood board to map out the visual look of the game. The desert vibes of its images – both of the landscapes and the fantasy costumes – could suggest Hammerfell, located to the south west of Skyrim, as the setting, and particularly its Alik'r desert region. It's the home of the redguards, and potentially an exciting direction for the series. Despite the massive desert, Hammerfell is otherwise a pretty varied place – incorporating grasslands, mountains and even a rainforest in its borders.

The speculation goes further still, though, because some of the more European images posted to the account have some assuming that the game will also incorporate parts of the High Rock region, home of the bretons.

HAMMERFELL AND HIGH ROCK HAVE BEEN SPECULATED AS THE SETTING

SAME WITH THE HAMMER

Here, *The Spy* should note that both Hammerfell and High Rock have been speculated as the setting for years – pretty much ever since Bethesda released a teaser video for the game a full six years ago.

Arguably all that's really happening here is that fans are finding ways to reinforce their existing theories. But, on the other hand, the Pinterest account recently went private – only adding fuel to those who claim that this is a real Bethesda account, now hidden after it got too much attention online.

The only thing that we can say for sure is that your information is precious and should be protected. That's why, on death, *The Spy* has left instructions to launch *The Spy*'s body and its many secrets into the most encrypted place in existence: a black hole. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy is sorry, but The Spy couldn't help but overhear what you were just saying.



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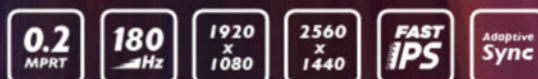
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Elvis has re-entered the building

DARKNESS RULES

N64 classic **PERFECT DARK** finds a new home on PC

Unlike Microsoft and Sony, Nintendo is still holding out from porting its dragon's hoard of exclusives to PC. And yet the PC still manages to be the best place to play Nintendo's back catalogue. Case in point: an unofficial PC port of sci-fi espionage shooter *Perfect Dark*, available to anyone able to (legally, of course) source an N64 ROM file for the game.

Of all consoles past, the N64 holds the dubious honour of being the one with the most overly ambitious games for its hardware. Even Nintendo's own in-house productions struggled to hit their 20-30 frame per second targets, a problem that only grew over time. While there's still debate as to whether *Perfect Dark* dethroned *GoldenEye* (it did), Rare's ambitious spy-fi FPS was unquestionably one of the most demanding games on the system, barely functioning without the RAM-boosting Expansion Pak. Emulation improves this situation slightly, but to really get the most out of an N64 game and give it the power it deserves, you need to port it to modern hardware.

While an official port of *Perfect Dark* exists on Xbox consoles (now part of the *Rare Replay* collection), it makes some tweaks to the original N64 aesthetic and remains console-bound. Enter the unofficial PC port, developed by an anonymous coder known as 'fgsdfsfgs' on Github. This

mouse-and-keyboard-friendly native PC version builds on the work done by code wizard Ryan Dwyer, who painstakingly decompiled *Perfect Dark*'s code. Once decompiled, that code could be reinterpreted and made to run with none of emulation's limitations. While it's still receiving the occasional update, fgsdfsfgs' *Perfect Dark* port is effectively complete, stable and a great way to play through this classic game in lieu of an official option.

LATE TO THE PARTY

Why dust off a ROM and play *Perfect Dark* in 2024 when there are decades of newer shooters built for PC? Well, for one thing, the reboot shown at this year's Xbox summer showcase showed a promising immersive sim-like approach to a shooter that does feel like an extension of what *Perfect Dark* aspired to back in 2000. Even in this golden era of boomer shooters, there's almost nothing else like the original. Other than its own direct lineage (starting with *GoldenEye*, ending with *Timesplitters*), few other games sell the idea of being a sci-fi spy so well.

Perfect Dark's 17-stage campaign never lets you forget that despite carrying a massive arsenal of weaponry, heroine Joanna Dark is a spy. While not a dedicated stealth game, every mission has you scouring labs for intel, hacking into panels using cool spy gadgets, photographing evidence and shutting down security systems. On the



Decompile, recompile

While efforts to manually decompile and port N64 games to other systems have seen great leaps recently, some coders are taking a different approach. Static Recompilation is a technique making major progress, converting N64 ROMs straight into PC parsable format. While the results are less easily modifiable than decompilations, the result is a near-instant PC port running at arbitrary resolutions and framerates.



FAR LEFT: *Perfect Dark* goes to some weird places.

LEFT: ...and some predictable ones too, as you'd expect from the developers of *GoldenEye 007*.

PORTS OF CALL *Four other N64 games making the long-overdue trip to PC via decompilation*



SUPER MARIO 64

The most full-featured decomp-port to date. More responsive controls and with a bevy of new features and mod support.



ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

A recent debut thanks to the *Ship Of Harkinian* project. Looks and feels great, and even has a built-in randomiser mode.



MARIO KART 64

Not playable yet, but making great progress. The decompilation is almost done, opening the door for a PC port.



DUKE NUKEM: ZERO HOUR

A good console spinoff, if you can get past the N64 jank. The near-complete decompilation aims to fix that.

highest difficulty you have just one non-replenishable health bar to complete each job, making caution and methodical exploration preferable to run-and-gun antics.

While the PC port offers the option to play *Perfect Dark* like a modern FPS with streamlined mouse-and-keyboard controls (and it's an acceptable way to play), the purist in me had to break out a gamepad for this one and let my crosshair roam free. Experienced in this semi-authentic fashion, *Perfect Dark's* crosshair is free-floating and heavily assisted, automatically dragging itself towards the centre-mass of enemies in front of you, making firing from the hip as effortless and cool as it should be for any spy. Set up for modern controls, aiming just zooms in the view slightly, while old-school mode freezes you in place to let you manually wiggle that crosshair around the screen, lining up headshots, shooting guns from enemies' hands or blasting them in the crotch to watch their exaggerated death animations. When there's cover to duck behind or corners to lean out from, it almost feels like playing *Time Crisis*.

Despite its defining quirks, *Perfect Dark* is no slouch as a pure FPS. It has an absurd arsenal of around 40 weapons, most with alt-fires or gimmick uses. There's splitscreen deathmatch, bot matches (with a variety of ranked challenges) and even a co-op mode that you can play with up to four AI buddies. The PC port allows up to four people on assorted controllers to play together, and while native online multiplayer (admittedly a perk of the 360 version) isn't on the cards, there's a lot here to enjoy, even with no nostalgia for the N64. If nothing else, it's a

reminder that the FPS genre was a lot more experimental 24 years ago, and that there's still of room to experiment.

DARK HORIZONS

With the modern reboot still absent a release date, there's ample time to memorise each and every one of Joanna's gadgets before seeing how they're brought in new forms. Just a couple years ago it seemed miraculous that *Perfect Dark* was making a comeback – and it seemed just as miraculous that any N64 game could be played natively on PC. But decompilation-based projects like this one are now flourishing, in large part due to the enormous performance benefits: widescreen and 60 (or 120+) fps support, modding, and on and on. While the code that this *Perfect Dark* port runs on reaches the same end result as the original game code (that is, running the game as intended), it's

all based on a painstakingly written new codebase created without access to any of Rare (or Nintendo's) legally protected source code.

While untested in court, it should – theoretically – be legally protected, and so far, no such projects for *Super Mario 64* or *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* have drawn any legal contest. Hopefully things will stay that way. If nothing else, I'd like to see more people get involved. *Perfect Dark* on PC already has basic mod support, but with the code fully available and tantalisingly open-source, the sky's the limit. New missions and stories could be just the beginning. ■

Dominic Tarason

ENTER THE UNOFFICIAL PC PORT, DEVELOPED BY AN ANONYMOUS CODER

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

WORD PLAY

ANDREW SHOULDICE on creating a new language for the world of *Tunic*

Although he began by teaching himself programming with books from the library that were “even at the time hilariously out of date”, Andrew Shouldice spent years learning before he was ready for a solo project, and to leave the game jams, and even the developer he’d eventually joined, behind.

He reached the point where he decided, “I can do not all the things, but many of the things; enough to make a complete game. I will need help with audio and music, and maybe some business help, but I could do it.” That game was *Tunic* – though, when he first started work on it in 2015, it was initially called *Secret Legend*.

The idea of a unique language was integral to development. “I’ve looked through old notes,” explains Shouldice, “and a thing that comes up every now and again in notes from early development, and even just cool game ideas from beforehand, is finding notes in a language you don’t understand. The thesis for *Tunic* is, or was, trying to evoke this really particular feeling of mystery that I got from certain games in my past.” He cites *Fez* as a relatively recent influence – but his childhood memories of the 1991 Game Boy game *Metroid II* were also instrumental in determining *Tunic*’s shape.

“Most of my exposure to the game was flipping through the manual while [my neighbour was] playing,” he says. The manual was strikingly designed, full of illustrations and strange words. “When you’re five years old or whatever, you don’t know what’s a word you don’t know, and

what’s a mysterious videogame thing. Reading something that is very clearly trying to communicate something to you, with illustrations and facts that you can’t read, and the odd interspersed English word that you do understand, I think was one of the main tools in trying to evoke this feeling of being a stranger in a strange land; of being in a place that’s not made for you. Of feeling like a little kid who snuck in to play your older sibling’s videogame.”

SAFE AS FOX

The language was already present a few months into development, but it had to be the *right* sort of language. “It needed to look like it was trying to

communicate something. But if you tried to decode it, it was *just* complicated enough that you couldn’t just do frequency analysis and crack it open the first time you had any amount of corpus. Part of the process of baking language, for reasons of expediency, was building a parser that would take input that I wrote and turn it into the glyph language. And it didn’t take raw English. It takes a more easily readable, phonetic cipher that uses normal keyboard characters. So I would type those in, and then I would press a button, I would generate a PNG that I could use either in the manual, or it could be generated on the fly at runtime to be included in the game.”

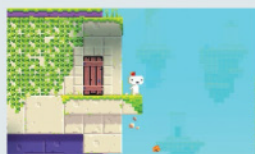
The bulk of *Tunic*’s language was created within just 24 hours or so. The final result was so effective, it even managed to catch Shouldice off guard at one point. When he sent an early build to Power Up Audio, they returned an audio treatment; a kind of demo reel for sound effects. At the end of the video was a message written in *Tunic*’s language... which he couldn’t read. “I was like, ‘Oh no, I have no idea how to read this!’ Because I had only ever written it, and I had only ever had computer programs generate [the glyphs] for me. So I needed to run upstairs and get that decoding key.”

People will glaze over a wall of text in a game, and *Tunic*’s approach avoided that problem. “I think if you present [players] with lots and lots of garbage, unreadable text, and then occasionally there’s a word in English,” explains Shouldice, “then their eyes will gravitate towards it, and they will see it as an important, rare treasure.” ■

Luke Kemp

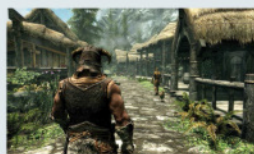
SPEAKING MY LANGUAGE

Four more games with unique lingo



FEZ

“We live in a post-*Fez* world”, says Shouldice. Want nonsense in your game? Make it decipherable!



ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Skyrim has been released 28,772 times, and each time, it’s included Dovahzul.



NIER

Nier games feature the Angelic Alphabet, which is based on the 16th century Celestial Alphabet.



HALO

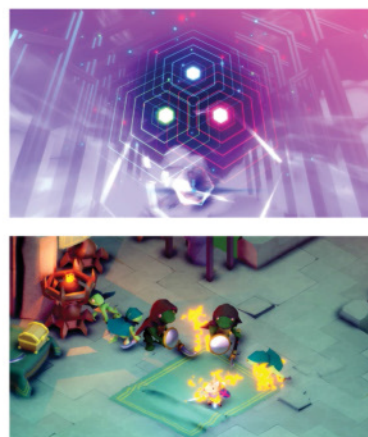
The Covenant speak in Sangheili, a complicated but translatable alien language.



THE IDEA OF A UNIQUE LANGUAGE WAS INTEGRAL TO DEVELOPMENT



It all looks very cute, but things can get very tricky.



ABOVE: That feeling when you've finally managed to crack *Tunic*'s language code.

LEFT: One of the game's many mysteries you just might solve with some translated text.

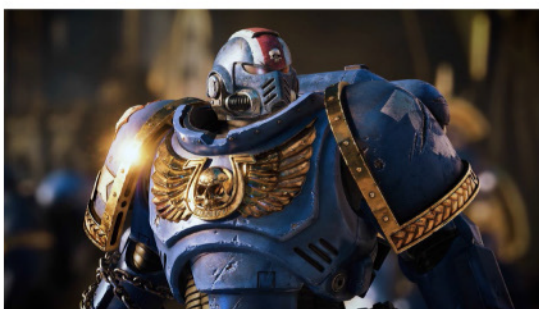
1 month



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 5, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped again to early September this year. But from what we've played so far the wait is going to be well worth it.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

Saber Interactive has been given a full extra year to make sure that Titus' return against the relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one. And it's looking like it will be.



GREEDFALL II: THE DYING WORLD

RELEASE September 24, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Spiders

The fantasy RPG series returns with a prequel. Explore the plague-infested lands of Gacane, using diplomacy, cunning or combat to achieve your aims.

2 months



DIABLO IV: VESSEL OF HATRED

RELEASE October 8, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The first expansion to *Diablo IV*, *Vessel of Hatred* introduces a new character class, Spiritborn, as well as a whole new region and co-op gameplay options.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 6

RELEASE October 25, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Treyarch

The online competitive military shooter returns once more, promising a new singleplayer campaign and a multiplayer experience with the return of Round-Based Zombies mode.



ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

RELEASE November 15, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Quebec

Finally, after more than 15 years of gamers asking for the series to go to Japan, it does, with players stepping into the shoes of samurai, Yasuke, and shinobi ninja, Naoe.

3 months



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2024

RELEASE November 19, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Asobo Studio

A successor to the excellent 2020 release of the long-running flight simulator, this year's release features an evolved engine, as well as new mission and aircraft types.



AVOWED

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

A first-person fantasy RPG that sees you step into the shoes of an envoy of Aedyr, a distant land, sent to investigate rumours of a spreading plague.



KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Warhorse Studios

Big hype is building for this story-driven action RPG set in a medieval open world. Play as Henry of Skalitz and fight amid the chaos of a civil war in 15th century Bohemia.

4 months+



INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Machine Games

From the devs that brought us the newer *Wolfenstein* games, we get an exciting new first-person action adventure for Indy set in 1937.



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress. Beautiful but bonkers turn-based RPG incoming out of left field.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** iD Software

Doom goes medieval. Fight as the Slayer and bring death to demons with an assortment of new weapons and, interestingly, a throwable chain-shield.

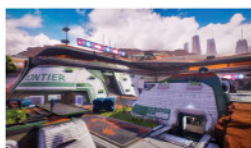
NEW FACES

BALDUR'S GATE 3

Planning on replaying *Baldur's Gate III* for the 27th time but have extinguished all the character presets? Well, thanks to the New Character Creation Presets mod by Toarie, you can now inject your game with tons more. They look great and make starting a new game with a fresh-looking character super easy. Grab the mod here: shorturl.at/u2Gbw







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
1047 GamesPUBLISHER
1047 GamesLINK
splitgate.com

SPLITGATE 2

The sequel to the breakout FPS is stepping out of the shadows

In a time when new multiplayer shooters regularly try and fail to escape the shadows of *Call of Duty*, *Fortnite* and *Apex Legends*, the story of *Splitgate* and its creators at 1047 Games defies all logic. There were several moments when the 'Halo with portals' arena shooter almost sank after failing to find a steady audience after its Steam launch in 2019.

It was a minor miracle when *Splitgate* reemerged with console ports in 2021 and became the hottest free-to-play game of that summer, exploding to a peak of 200,000 concurrent players and briefly making a traditional arena shooter one of the most-played games in the world.

But what's most surprising to me is what happened after the team of around 20 at 1047 Games, who'd spent months putting out fires caused by *Splitgate*'s unexpected popularity, couldn't keep up with the content demands of its players. The game's five minutes of fame had expired, player numbers were way down, but 1047 didn't plug away at updates in the hopes of luring people back, or call it quits. Instead, it got the opportunity to do what so few studios in the live service biz ever get to do: put the old *Splitgate* on a shelf, and start making a sequel.

FRESH START

"We felt like we had a really good feel of what's missing from [*Splitgate 1*]. And I think we only had two things that we were actually happy with," Ian Proulx, 1047

Games CEO and creative director, tells me in the office of his Lake Tahoe waterfront home in Nevada. "We thought we had great gunplay and we really like the portal mechanic. Everything else about the game, we just did sort of good enough."

This time six years ago, Proulx and co-founder Nicholas Bagamian were grinding away at *Splitgate* from Proulx's parents' house with a lean, remote crew of 15. In 2024, 1047 is still remote, but has steadily grown to over 160. That number took me by surprise – in the year and a half since 1047 went behind the curtain to start on *Splitgate 2*, the small studio with a student game that punched above its weight has quietly become a landing pad for veteran FPS talent from Infinity Ward, Ubisoft, 343 Industries, and more.

The realisation brought 1047's decision to leave its first game behind into focus: *Splitgate* was successful, but it was also cobbled together with code Proulx wrote when he was still a student, maps he designed himself that he now considers "really bad" and an "all over the place" art style that represented the best they could do at the time. *Splitgate 2* would be a fresh start on an upgraded Unreal Engine 5, designed from the ground up with "triple-A everything, triple-A graphics, art, style, triple-A sound, triple-A animation, VFX, everything," as Proulx describes to me with excitement.

PLAYED
IT

CLASS ACTS

The first few months of development were spent brainstorming exactly what kind of shooter *Splitgate 2* would be. Proulx wanted the sequel to require more teamwork, have "world class" seasonal updates, more variety, and to lower the barrier to entry while "maintaining a high skill ceiling".

"What if *Splitgate 2* were a hero shooter? What would it look like if it were a *CoD* clone? Would it look like if it were class-based? What would it look like if we just stuck to a *Halo*-style arena shooter?"

The creative director landed on an intriguing combination of them all: *Splitgate 2* has three classes with unique pools of weapons and gear that can be customised, plus *Halo*-style power weapons that spawn on maps. Each of

THREE CLASSES WITH UNIQUE POOLS OF WEAPONS AND GEAR THAT CAN BE CUSTOMISED



✦ these factions – Aeros, Sabrask and Meridian – were designed to accommodate three distinct playstyles. Aeros is a movement-focused faction with a speed boost ability that's all about slick portaling and constant aggression.

"Aeros is really targeting your *Splitgate 1* players, the type of people who love building in *Fortnite*," Proulx says. "It's the mechanically gifted individuals who want to put the team on their back, play fast, play aggressive and portal like a madman."

Sabrask is a defensive faction with a barrier wall ability, best for holding down capture points or covering your own back against sneaky portals.

"It's targeting your *Call of Duty* or *Halo* type player. I want to run and gun, I want to shoot stuff. I'm not the fastest player, but I still have a portal gun. I'm still at a huge advantage if I can use it."

And then there's Meridian, the closest thing to a support role in *Splitgate 2*. They can activate temporary wall hacks for the whole team and optionally bring a deployable healing station, but their most unique equipment is the Time Dome, a deployable that creates an AoE field that slows down movement and rate-of-fire for enemies while speeding everything up for allies.

I sampled all three classes in the few matches I played and was surprised by how similar they all played. The abilities and small sample of equipment I tried out are different enough that players will quickly find favourites, but situational healing pads and temporary speed boosts never mattered as much as how well I was shooting and portaling. I got the impression that what ultimately decides matches is good ol' fashioned gunplay, and Proulx tells me that's exactly what they're going for.

He places *Splitgate 2* on a spectrum between *Valorant*, a game that's all about positioning and aim, and *Overwatch 2*, a game that emphasises powerful abilities. "We are much more like a *Valorant* than an *Overwatch*," Proulx says. "We wanted the success of the game to, ballpark, be 80% dictated by your ability to shoot and portal and have good positioning. And 20% is more about abilities on top of that."

WHAT ULTIMATELY DECIDES MATCHES IS GOOD OL' FASHIONED GUNPLAY

GROWING LANES

Splitgate 2's other major divergence is map design. Gone are the bowl-shaped arenas of *Splitgate 1*. In their place are "three-lane style" maps closer in feel to *Call of Duty* than *Halo*. Proulx says this shift in map philosophy was informed by a common negative experience with *Splitgate 1*'s highly-vertical, asymmetrical battlefields.

"With *Splitgate*, we saw a lot of this feeling of, 'I have no idea where I'm getting shot from,'" Proulx says. "There were some crazy portal angles where you're standing in the middle of Olympus, you've got four portals above you, and the entire map is a giant circle. I don't think that lends itself well to portal play."

It's true that I never really felt all that comfortable on *Splitgate 1* maps. They were easy to get lost in from the jump, and even more so once portals entered the mix. The sheer number of portal surfaces and possible exploitable angles encouraged hunkering down on a small corner of map.

After playing three matches of a pre-alpha build of *Splitgate 2*, I see what Proulx means by these flatter maps providing more "structure". The two maps I played were very readable and intuitive. Portal surfaces, while more scarce than in the old game, feel more deliberately placed. I noticed portal walls on every extreme corner of a map, making for easy fast travel. In one objective mode, portal walls lined key choke points where players can either rush for an overtake or sneakily create kill windows. I never got lost in my short time with *Splitgate 2* even after running through a handful of portals – a notch in the 'pro' column for the sequel's smaller, simpler maps.

Though, I think 1047 might also sacrifice some personality in pursuit of accessibility. The two maps I played, plus another map I saw but didn't play, were more beautiful, artistically ambitious and more expensive-looking than anything in *Splitgate 1*, but a week later I'm having trouble remembering anything about them, layout-wise. As is the case with every modern *Call of Duty*, it's hard for any one map to stand out when they all start from the same three-lane blueprint.

This is one aspect of the sequel I walked away with real concerns about. Maybe it's the reformed competitive FPS player in me – one who'd, these days, rather take a chance on a lopsided shooter with lots of variety than one that's perfectly balanced – that wishes the



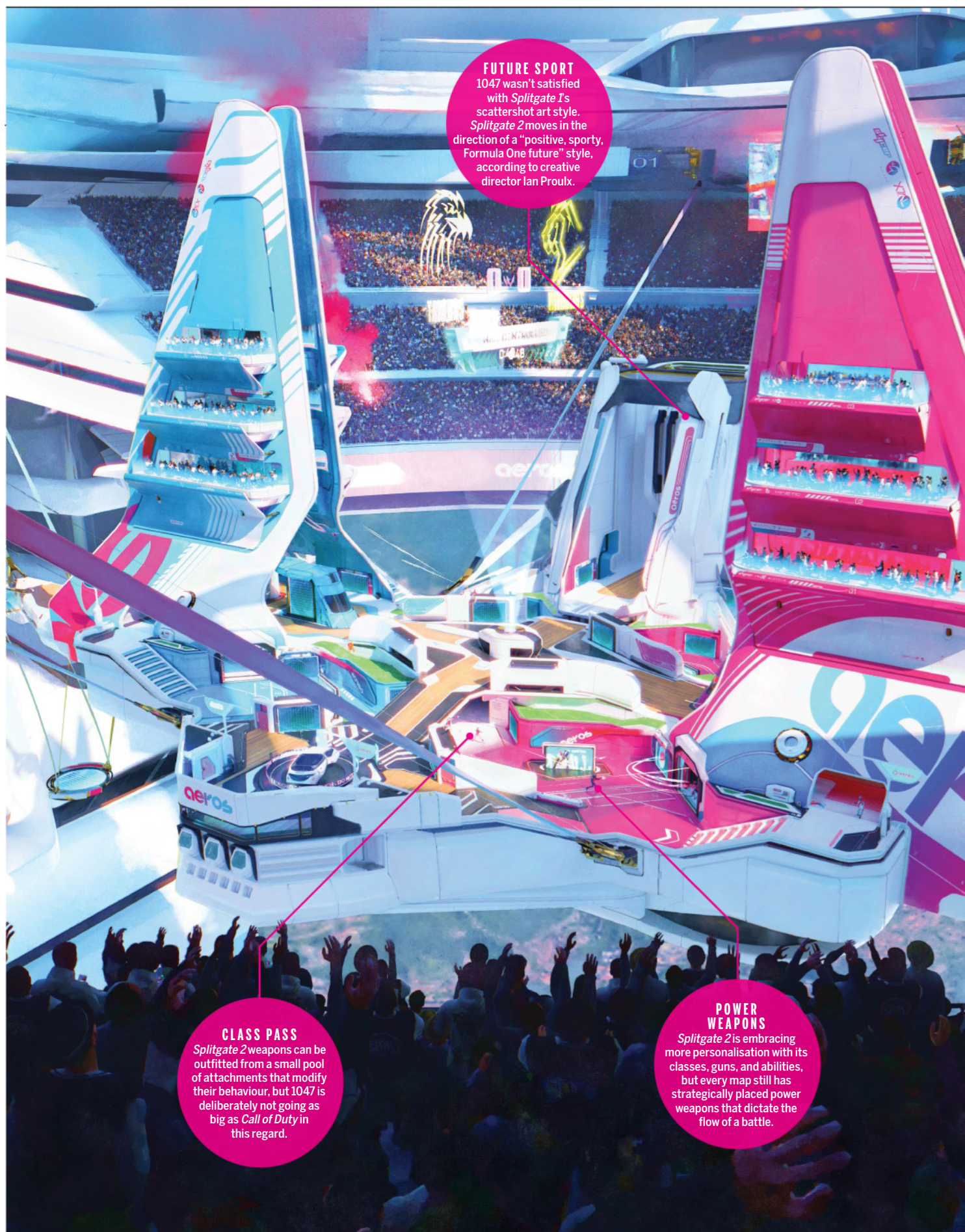
You now can't miss the portal-able walls.





ABOVE: Maps will have some verticality, but they'll be easier to parse than the original game's.

LEFT: 1047 has tweaked portal surfaces so that friendly portals will 'nudge' out of the way of teammates.

**FUTURE SPORT**

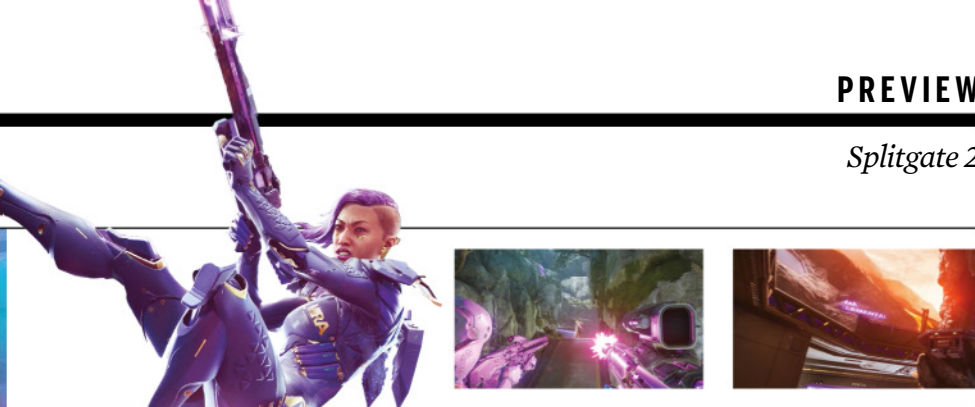
1047 wasn't satisfied with *Splitgate 1*'s scattershot art style. *Splitgate 2* moves in the direction of a "positive, sporty, Formula One future" style, according to creative director Ian Proulx.

CLASS PASS

Splitgate 2 weapons can be outfitted from a small pool of attachments that modify their behaviour, but 1047 is deliberately not going as big as *Call of Duty* in this regard.

POWER WEAPONS

Splitgate 2 is embracing more personalisation with its classes, guns, and abilities, but every map still has strategically placed power weapons that dictate the flow of a battle.



Splitgate 2 maps I saw were weirder. I'm sure I'll latch onto little things about 1047's maps eventually, like its restrained use of verticality and multi-floor buildings, but I'm starting to think maps won't be the star of *Splitgate 2*.

HOT ZONE

What might be a star is *Splitgate 2*'s modes, and particularly Hot Zone, its take on King of the Hill. Proulx is proud of Hot Zone, and particularly the way it aims to "make kills matter" the way they do in a tactical shooter like *Counter-Strike 2* or a battle royale, but still allow for respawning. "We're not building a tactical shooter here, we want you to respawn, because that's our NDA. And so we settled on this very unique and rewarding style of respawning," he says. "Hot Zone is round-based and respawn timers increase throughout the length of a round."

Hot Zone rounds are short – the first team to capture two hills wins. Rounds begin with quick five-second respawns which climb as high as 20 seconds (1047 is still tweaking what the max should be). That means dying later in a round can severely handicap your team, but there's still hope: scoring kills shortens respawn times for your team by five seconds. "And so you end up with these really epic comebacks where I can be the last man on my team alive, I have three dead teammates, but I get one kill, and I just turned the stakes on you," Proulx says. "People love it."

I played a few rounds of Hot Zone and it is pretty neat. The quick respawn times meant that the first minute of the round felt indistinguishable from standard KOTH, but as the timer increased, the round gradually shifted to a *Rainbow Six Siege*-like face off against uneven odds. To add another wrinkle, progress toward capturing hills is shared between teams. That means it doesn't matter who holds a hill the longest, only which team holds it at the end of the capture. It's a genuinely unique spin on a classic first-person shooter mode we rarely get anymore, though to be honest, what would've hit the spot as I was getting used to the controls would've been classic Team Deathmatch.

THE PROGRESS TOWARD CAPTURING HILLS IS SHARED BETWEEN TEAMS

MEANINGFUL VARIETY

Thankfully, Hot Zone and Team Deathmatch are the two that'll be available in an upcoming playtest, and the first of many that we'll see in the full game. 1047 isn't talking specifics yet, but Proulx has big plans for game modes in *Splitgate 2*. Though, we shouldn't expect every mode to always be available.

Proulx tells me that designing *Splitgate 2*'s seasonal content plan has been an "obsession" of his throughout development. A large part of 1047's plan is to regularly introduce new modes and featured playlists that rotate in and out, not unlike *Call of Duty*, alongside a set of "core" modes that are always available. "We've totally refactored our game mode code to be as easy to customise everything as possible. We'll be able to pump out all sorts of modes in the future."

Proulx says he learned a lesson with the first *Splitgate* that, if you actually want a lot of players to find and enjoy a mode, less can be more. "In *Splitgate 1*, we had this laundry list of modes that are all kind of the same thing available 24/7," Proulx says. "With this next game, we want the modes available 24/7 to be absolute A-plus modes, and they have to be meaningful in terms of variety."

He offers one of *Splitgate 1*'s coolest side modes as an example of variety that went to waste. "In *Splitgate 1* we had this laser tag mode, where it's low gravity and everyone has unlimited plasma rifles. That's actually really fun every once in a while, but when you put in 24/7, it just ends up being a dead playlist," he says. "Because people try it when it first comes out, they play for a couple hours, but then the novelty wears off."

SPLIT IDENTITY

The rest of the *Splitgate 2* puzzle, like monetisation and progression, 1047 isn't ready to talk about. For now, the focus is on a summer playtest where players will form their first impressions of *Splitgate 2*'s big changes.

The future of *Splitgate* isn't 'Halo with portals', and Proulx struggles to find a clean label to replace it. With its classes, laned maps and gun customisation, he stops short of calling it an arena shooter, but hopes fans will recognise *Splitgate 2* still has that old-school spirit. "It's not ADS [aim down sights]. We're in this lane, which is hip fire, old-school *Splitgate*/*Halo* style shooter. And I think we do it better than anyone else."

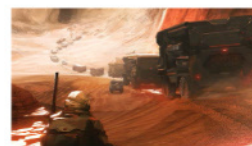
Morgan Park



ABOVE: There are a pleasing number of mechanical walkers.

RIGHT: Environmental hazards such as lava can impede your exploration.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Q3 2024DEVELOPER
Proxy StudiosPUBLISHER
Proxy StudiosLINK
s.team/a/1481170

ZEPHON

Something tells me we're not on Gladius any more

Proxy Studios made *Warhammer 40,000: Gladius*, a well-regarded and luxuriously expanded 4X with the heavy focus on combat you'd expect from the grim darkness of the far future. I mention this only because *Zephon* is a 4X, is also set in a futuristic dark grimness, and has a familiar combat system.

Rather than the galaxy-spanning civilisations of 40K, brought together on the planet Gladius for a big fight, *Zephon* is more Earth-based and tells the story of the end of the planet's civilisation, and what comes after. A piece of artwork visible in the introduction shows apparently human figures in front of a tentacled beast, which is always a nice thing to see. Later, we're told that Earth's war machines kept fighting after their pilots were dead, presumably turning against their creators having been taken over by an extraterrestrial threat.

The game will be instantly familiar to *Gladius* players, as well as those who've played a 4X recently, but there's one detail that catches your eye if you've been taking your Space Marines up against roaming Castellan robots and Enslavers in that particular godforsaken part of the galaxy: the way units reshuffle themselves when they take a loss. It suggests the underlying tech and rules are the same as, or at least based on, those of *Gladius*, and the game's Steam description says the game is "built on Proxy's unique tactical combat

system", suggesting it's only got one of them. Still, it does mean that bombarding an enemy unit with explosives looks great, as not only do you see the blooming, booming results of your ordnance, but the effect it has on its targets too, with individuals falling, and reviving again if the unit is able to.

FIGHT THE FUTURE

Proxy's previous game was heavily combat oriented, pushing the 4X's final X, exterminate, to the fore. *Zephon* appears to be following a similar formula, as the small units of soldiers, engineers, and a single buggy handed over for control in a demo match quickly encounter a large horned beast that spews a white substance over the troops. There are roaming bands of enemies with shields, and a scrapyard construct known as a Warden that takes out the vehicle in a blur of swirling sawblades, slowing down the exploration.

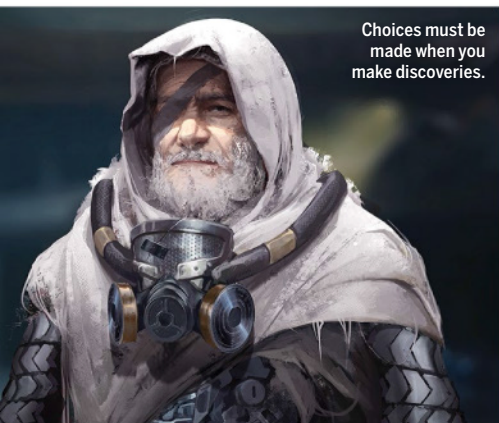
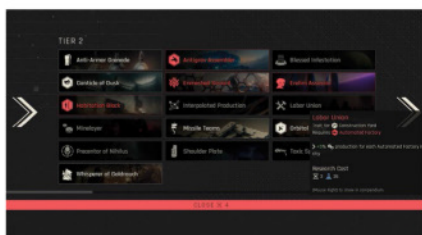
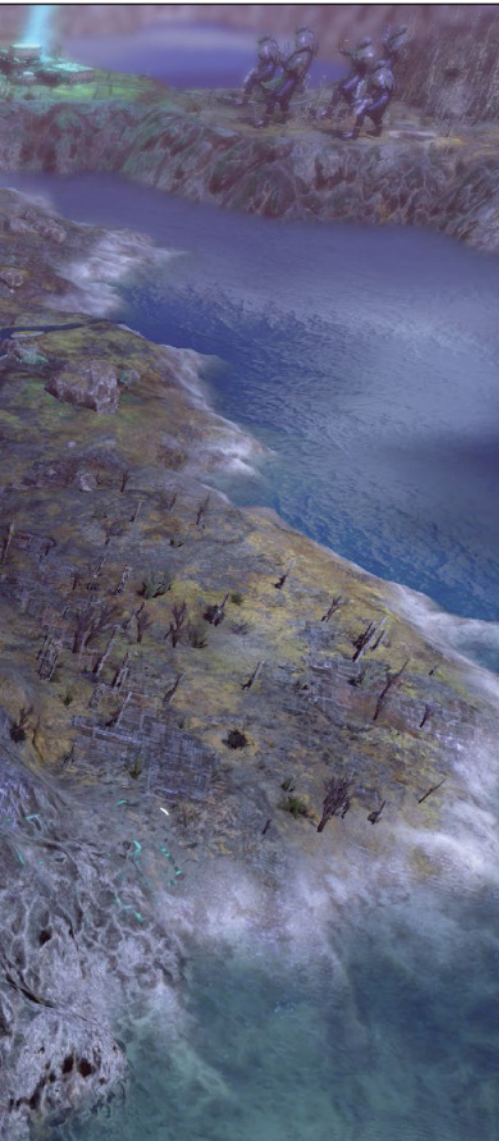
The human infantry have Overwatch as a passive trait, so can catch moving enemies in a hail of bullets if they pass too close. The horned beasts (plus a roving pack of three smaller versions) are too tough for mere machine guns, however, and the soldiers are quickly picked off. Just like the roving creatures of *Gladius*, they're best avoided in the early game.

The world of *Zephon* is a wreck, with frozen, twisted forests (providing cover), pools of lava, the occasional point of interest to garrison with your troops or engineers (as well as allowing them to extract resources, such as Chips or Algae), and a lot of brown earth, blasted clean of vegetation. Your troops can be a chatty bunch, observing that this isn't the world they remember while charging into battle with monsters.

Progress, and there's more than monsters on offer, with factions and diplomacy becoming a larger part of the game alongside the endless fighting. There are peaceful aliens as well as warlike ones to treat with, a tech tree to inch your way along, and cities to build and conquer. Shorn of the 40K baggage, *Zephon* could allow Proxy to create something fresh and new, and that's got to be worth celebrating.

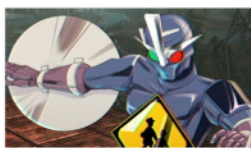
Ian Evenden

A LARGE HORNED BEAST THAT SPEWS A WHITE SUBSTANCE OVER THE TROOPS



Choices must be made when you make discoveries.

Promise Mascot Agency



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Kaizen Game WorksPUBLISHER
Kaizen Game WorksLINK
kaizengameworks.com

PROMISE MASCOT AGENCY

The world's first open world mascot management crime drama

It's hard to believe *Promise Mascot Agency's* developers believe in the words 'too far'. My assistant at the agency I have to return to profit, which exclusively employing weirdos and rejects, is a child-height severed finger. The first mascot I run into in the nearby town is a cat covered in cum (sorry, Japanese yam). He loves porn. And yet...

"We toned that down," laughs art director Rachel Noy. "That had a certain name that I don't really feel comfortable repeating." Like Kaizen's first game *Paradise Killer*, *Promise Mascot Agency* throws wild characters in your face with devil-may-care glee. But where that wonderful 2020 detective game had an anything-goes attitude with its coterie of immortal gods, this one is more rooted in Japanese pop culture, which their British creators credit to their collaboration with Capcom and Tango Gameworks veteran Ikumi Nakamura and her concept artist. They pitched the rough idea for the game to Nakamura – a disgraced yakuza managing a team of living mascots – and then the designs started flowing in. Bizarre designs.

"There wasn't anything obscene or too graphic," reassures director Oli Clarke Smith. "But [cat mascot] Trororo's original name, from Ikumi, that would've hit the age ratings... badly." Emboldened by Nakamura's designs, the team leaned into the idea of the world itself being less fantastical than *Paradise Killer's* magical island. The characters within it being

off-kilter only serves to highlight their weirdness and the comic side of the game, which enriches what could otherwise be a menu-heavy management game. Once I'd recruited a couple mascots I got to work assigning them jobs that best suited their characteristics. Early on it's simple, but later on you'll have to keep an eye on your finances and also ensure your mascots and the recruitable heroes you send in to aid them are levelling up their stats to complete harder jobs.

Minigames give you the opportunity to play cards in a quick, stripped down deckbuilder. After I recruited tokusatsu-style hero Captain Sign, for example, his card let me take another action. "We've had god knows how many versions since the beginning, and all of them have been dreadful except for this one," says Smith. "We prefer combo-based games where you have a handful of cards you combo together. We wanted a simple version of that where the complexity comes in how the numbers scale up."

TOWNIES

The more active half of the game, outside menus, is driving around the town of Kaso-Machi, finding characters, collectibles and sidequests while Pinky chats with you from the back of the truck. Nakamura had a big hand in shaping this part of the game, too, suggesting instead of a city that *Promise Mascot Agency* be set in a Japanese town that's been largely abandoned by the youth as more and more of the population leaves rural life behind.

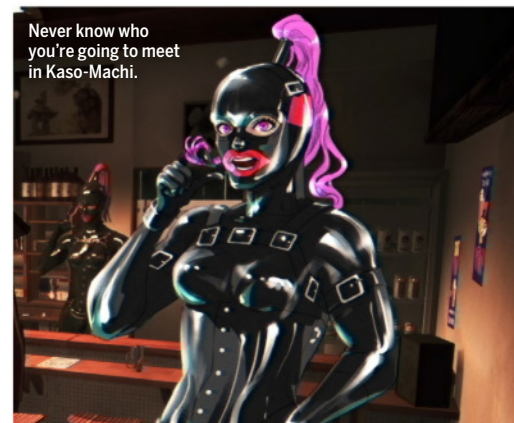
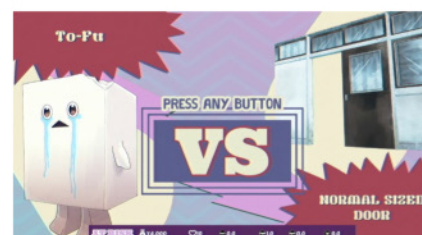
"This needed to be a more grounded world and story than *Paradise Killer* to show people trying to achieve their dreams, communities coming together and being rebuilt and fighting back against bureaucrats and governments," says Smith. "When I wrote *Paradise Killer* I was coming out of a whole bunch of jobs where I hadn't felt very valued, so I was very angry. In *PK* everyone's pissed off at you, it's got this anger to it."

"Mascot is more hopeful. It's like, yes the world is shit, but you're going to find your tribe and get through it together," says Noy. If it's not the most giddily creative game you play next year, I'll offer up my pinky as penance.

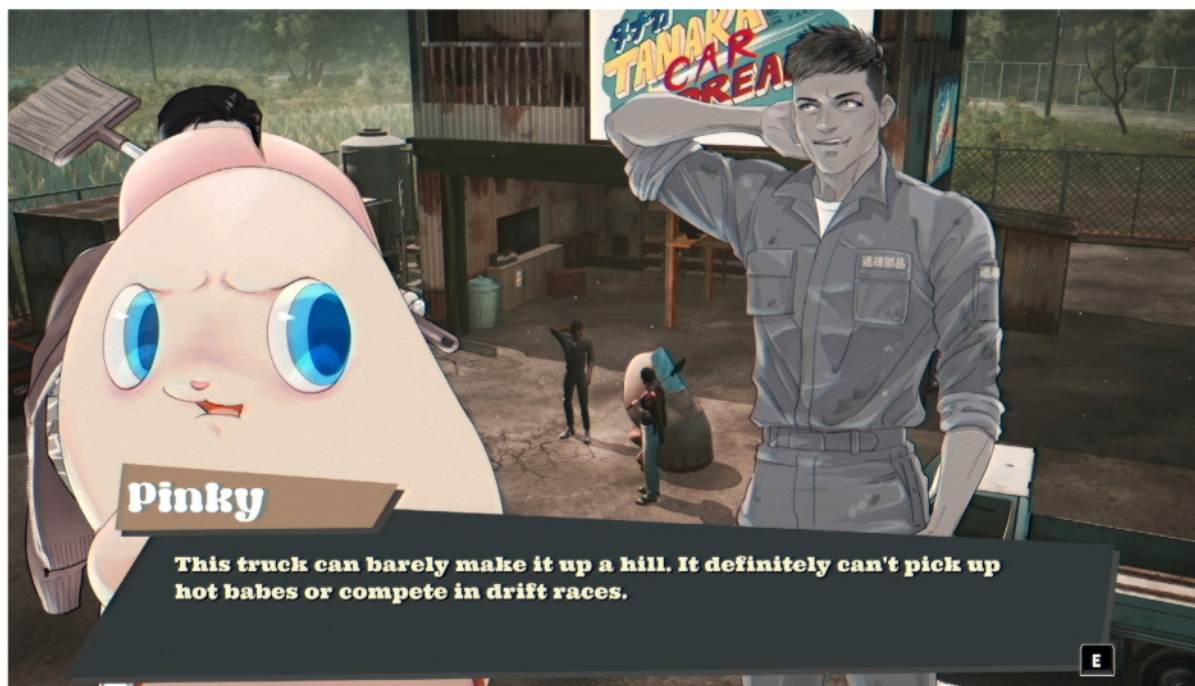
Wes Fenlon



PLAYED IT



THROWS WILD CHARACTERS IN YOUR FACE WITH DEVIL-MAY-CARE GLEE



ABOVE: Pinky is a charmer, despite her truly horrific design.

LEFT: Not yet it can't.

OTK EXPO PREVIEW

HOT GAMES FROM THE OTK LIVE STREAM by Ian Evenden



RELEASE
September 2024

DEVELOPER
BitCake Studio

PUBLISHER
Mad Mushroom

LINK
s.team/a/1903560

ATOMIC PICNIC

Sandwiches and sausage rolls give way to bullets

A co-op roguelike bullet-hell-inspired third-person shooter is a lot of description for a game to carry, but *Atomic Picnic* shoulders the burden gleefully.

An arena shooter that can be played solo or with up to three friends, this is a fast-moving game with hints of *Borderlands* and

Fortnite about it in the way numbers pop off your cel-shaded enemies as you do them damage. In motion, it's a colourful blaster with environments that are filled with ledges to jump on and cover to get behind, while killing monsters gets you crystals that can activate power-ups. The idea is that, following a calamity that has left the planet filled with monsters, survivors go on expeditions called 'picnics' to discover loot and find fame.

Not long into my first match, I'm getting health restored by killing enemies while a group of ghosts orbits me, doing extra damage. I have a double-jump to access higher areas, from where I can pour fire into those below, and there are of course upgrades to make you even deadlier.

FIRST
LOOK



Giant space squid are the least of your problems.

OTK Q&A



Ovilee May
Executive producer

How important is the OTK Expo for indie game discovery?

The OTK Games Expo was started by OTK because at our core, we love videogames. We aim to showcase true diamonds in the rough, supporting independent developers who are just starting their journey and veterans leaving big studios behind to make their own projects. We carefully select games we know our community would love to play while ensuring enough variation so fans of different genres can go home happy. We've also given away over \$150,000 in grants to developers that were fan favourites of the expo, which allowed them to take their ideas even further.

How hard was it to fit so many games in?

Whittling down our list of submissions is always the hardest part of the expo. This year we introduced our first ever pre-show where we were able to showcase the trailers of more than 20 games that fell just short of expo inclusion.

What are you hoping for from the next expo?

We're excited to introduce the first ever OTK Games Expo Winter! Taking place in mid-November, our winter expo will showcase even more indie titles as well as other big announcements that we know fans are dying to hear.



CLAWS & CHAOS

Putting the 'cute' in execute

Dire circumstances may be my new favourite way of describing a game's setting, as it blends straightforward descriptiveness with comical understatement. And the circumstances in

Claws & Chaos are indeed dire. A great flood has led to the construction of an ark, but there are no seats left, leaving a group of cute woodland creatures to fight their way onto the boat.

They do this through a series of auto-resolving battles, where your strategy is in creating a team and equipping it with items to improve its effectiveness, raising the population cap so you can have more fighters, and considering the mix so that you're

not left with a non-violent bard whose role is to buff your fighters but can't defend himself.

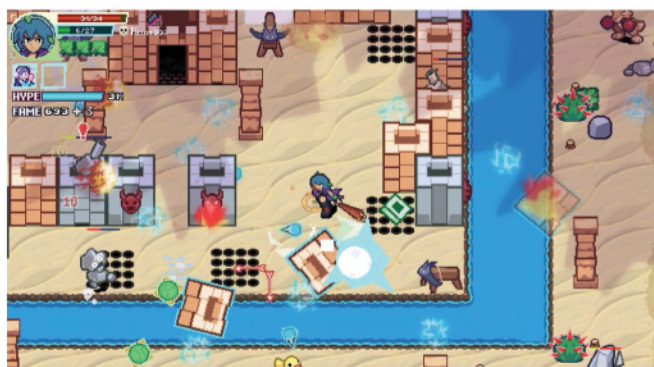
FIRST LOOK

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Parhelion Studio

PUBLISHER
Mad Mushroom

LINK
clawchaos.com



ROGUE LABYRINTH

The kind of reality TV we can get behind

R'Reclaim your country from a billionaire' is a strong pitch for a game, and when he's built you a monster-filled labyrinth it just gets better.

This roguelite monster-hacker sends you off into a

procedurally generated labyrinth full of creatures and NPCs. Rather than simply bashing the latter with a sword, however, you can make friends with them in the hopes of increasing your abilities.

The game gets chaotic pretty quickly, with just about anything able to be turned into a projectile, including enemy shots (which are slow moving and telegraphed) and the enemies themselves, often bouncing around the screen unpredictably. In demo form it's a lot of fun, and its Slay the Spire-style branching structure offers a great deal of potential replay value too.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE
January 2025

DEVELOPER
Tea Witch Games

PUBLISHER
Tea Witch Games

LINK
s.team/a/2412110



WORLD'S WORST HANDYMAN

Unlucky odd-job man with a heart of gold

Saving an animal shelter has to be one of the best motivations for diving into the chaos of fixing plumbing and cutting down trees with a sword I've

ever seen. You play as Doug, an animal-loving handyman with the requisite facial hair and cargo shorts for the position but none of the skills we expect from those who strap on tool belts for a living. His heart's in the right place, though, despite his attempts to beat an overflowing lavatory to death with a plunger, and he seems to be in demand so must be doing something right. Sadly, he's a bit unlucky, and his jobs rapidly descend into mayhem, requiring him to stealthily dodge angry old ladies, sumo wrestlers and dinosaurs in order to get them done.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE
September 2024

DEVELOPER
Baby Lumberjack

PUBLISHER
Baby Lumberjack

LINK
s.team/a/1333930

PREVIEW

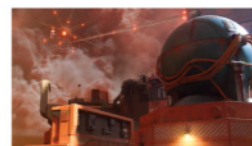
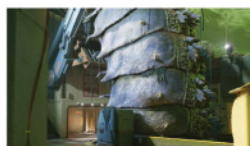
Concord



ABOVE: One mode has players brawl over a single capture point.

RIGHT: They might have gone slightly overboard on the effects, but it's certainly colourful.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

August 23, 2024

DEVELOPER

Firewalk Studios

PUBLISHER

Sony Interactive Entertainment

LINK

playstation.com

CONCORD

Just another Overwatch clone? Maybe not

Concord's reveal trailer was met with some boos from the balcony: great, another *Overwatch*. It is a sci-fi PvP hero shooter, but after playing it, I can confirm that *Concord* isn't Sony's *Overwatch*. And it's fun. We may not be looking at a *Helldivers* 2-level phenomenon, but *Concord* could be the multiplayer hit of the summer.

There are obvious similarities between *Concord* and *Overwatch* – both feature a bunch of characters with unique guns – but it's also obvious that a bunch of ex-Bungie devs work at developer Firewalk Studios. Most characters have double jumps, one I played had a triple jump, and another could temporarily hover. They can also dodge, which briefly pulls the camera into third-person like a *Destiny 2* super. On the multi-level maps, these abilities lead to fun *Halo*-like chase scenes.

I played three modes: one was a kill confirmed-style mode and the other two were no-respawn modes where rounds were won by either playing an objective or eliminating the enemy team. In those latter modes, my team and I started rushing down different lanes and trying new strategies as the rounds progressed the way you do in *Valorant* or *CS2* – not very *Overwatch*-like at all.

With 16 characters right away, meta-heads will have a complex web of synergies to chart. The characters are substantially different from each other in terms of mobility, deadliness, utility and

durability, and there are variations even within categories. One tank has 250 health, another has 300. I also clocked health pools of 220, 200, and 170.

Along with their unique guns, *Concord*'s heroes also have two abilities and a passive skill, though no ultimates. I didn't miss 'em. It can be fun to change the course of a match with a perfectly executed ult, but the victory always feels a little hollow to me – I'd rather win with a skin-of-my-teeth double kill than by filling up a meter and going Super Saiyan.

FAST HANDS

What makes *Concord* a certain type of shooter in my mind – its defining feature aside from its multi-tiered maps and floaty jumping – is its emphasis on cycling through weapons and abilities. The guns don't have big magazines and reloading isn't fast, so finishing blows often come from a sidearm or ability.

Haymar, for example, can hover over the battlefield temporarily and fires nasty flaming crossbow bolts. Her crossbow has to be reloaded after each shot, and it takes at least a couple of direct hits for a kill. A good player doesn't just rely on bolts, then, following them with her flash-bang orb to disorient targets before finishing them with a melee attack, or a flame wall.

What hasn't clicked for me are the characters' personalities. The developers emphasised that despite their fantastical, sci-fi backgrounds, these are just regular people. I think they're too regular. It's like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

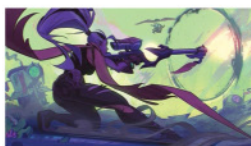
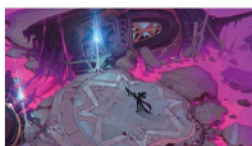
Firewalk plans to produce weekly cutscenes, and characters will evolve, so we'll see where it goes. I'm sure the hope is that fandoms develop around its cast of space misfits, in part to fuel spending on cosmetics, but I like that *Concord* is a \$40 game like *Helldivers 2*. Aside from those 16 characters, the entry fee will get you six modes and 16 maps at launch.

Oh yeah: the preview session at Sony's office was on PS5, meaning I was playing with a controller. The auto-aim magnets seemed strong on some guns, and *Concord* will launch on PS5 and PC with crossplay, so it's possible we'll see some tension between console and PC players over who's got the advantage.

Tyler Wilde

WITH 16 CHARACTERS RIGHT AWAY, META-HEADS WILL HAVE A COMPLEX WEB OF SYNERGIES





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Open beta in 2024

DEVELOPER

Theorycraft Games

PUBLISHER

Theorycraft Games

LINK

playsupervive.com

SUPERVIVE

This unusual new game from ex-Riot devs has potential

If Riot Games added guns and a battle royale mode to *League of Legends*, it would probably look like *Supervive*. In fact, at first glance you'd be forgiven for thinking you are looking at a new *LoL* game mode: a lot of the *Supervive* team once worked at Riot, including studio CEO Joe Tung.

Supervive has grown to become much more than a *LoL* game mode since its inception, however. It's a fast-paced top-down hero shooter in which you compete as a team or solo against 39 other players in a battle royale. You'll pick where to drop, kill creeps to level up and collect gear, then go hunt other teams to take them out and be the last one standing.

As someone with thousands of hours across *League of Legends*, *Dota* and other MOBAs, it was difficult to unlearn things I expected to happen. You move your character with WASD and aim your basic attacks and some abilities with the mouse, so there is no way to control the camera. When I played as a backline glass cannon, it was initially annoying that my camera was almost always centred on me, when I wanted to be watching the front line of the fight to see what opportunities I could take.

When I moved over to playing tanky frontliners, including my guy Kingpin who is basically a version of *Dota's* Pudge or *Overwatch's* Roadhog, I finally started to feel slightly useful. Throwing out a massive hook and then smashing

whoever got caught with my close range stun was satisfying, and obvious enough that I could pick out the impact my abilities were having, something I otherwise struggled with.

GLIDING FUN

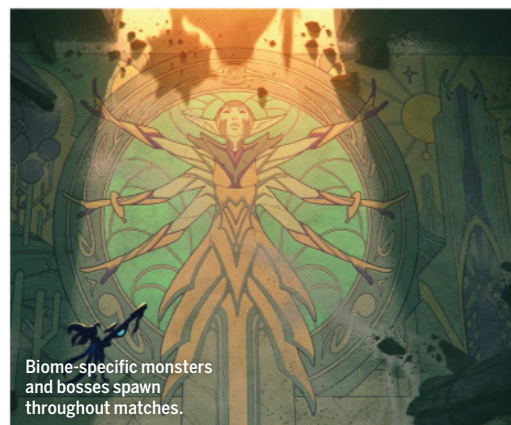
While the fighting does resemble a MOBA with guns, the rest of *Supervive* is very un-MOBA like. The map is massive and made up of lots of floating islands, with gaps between different areas. You can fly across these gaps with your glider, which is an incredibly satisfying way of moving around, but if you take damage while gliding you get spiked, dying instantly, in what is already seen as an insulting way to kill someone. Spiking someone is one of those hype moments that really make you feel good and I expect will become the highlight reel plays for *Supervive*.

Then there's *Supervive's* revive system, which has a massive impact on the game. Until the final few fights where the battle royale circle forces you together, running away when a fight is going badly is the strategy to employ. Standing on a revive station will alert nearby enemies, but if you can fill up the progress bar your entire team respawns and you are back in the game.

This influences every decision you make, possibly for the worse: sometimes fights turn into long distance poke-fests with each team trying to land one ability to get the advantage while keeping the option to run away available. I expect, when things open up to more players, this will become the meta and the epic multi-team fights I experienced will be a rarity as there is too much risk involved. I hope I'm wrong, because dancing around on the edge of ability ranges hoping an enemy steps in the wrong place isn't all that fun, whereas jumping in and causing chaos is.

The four hours I got with *Supervive* were nowhere near enough to offer up any definitive statements, but I do think it could be another 10,000-hour game, and the dev team likes to claim it will be. The fighting is inherently fun when it finally kicks off, the battle royale system works surprisingly well, and it's complex: even after four hours, I'm still a complete beginner.

Mike Stubbs



Biome-specific monsters and bosses spawn throughout matches.

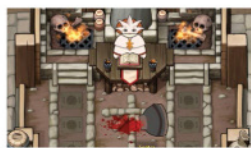
HUNT OTHER TEAMS TO TAKE THEM OUT AND BE THE LAST ONE STANDING



ABOVE: There are over 15 heroes in the game right now.

LEFT: It may look like a MOBA, but it sure doesn't play like one.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

July 18, 2024 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Long Jaunt

PUBLISHER

Hooded Horse

LINK

www.norlandgame.com

NORLAND

Crusader Kings meets RimWorld in this medieval story engine

Oh thank God, they're having sex," I sigh as my king and his wife, Harold and Carol, finally get down to business. This, I admit, is not a typical reaction to seeing two people express their affection for one another. But Harold and Carol's unconsummated love life has been threatening the stability of my entire kingdom.

It's nothing to do with heirs, although one of those wouldn't go amiss either. Harold, you see, is a deeply monogamous soul, but lately he's been too preoccupied with his royal duties to see to his marital ones. Carol, meanwhile, has a libido to rival an entire warren of rabbits, to the point where she's been considering bribing peasants into her bed.

Morality aside, for Carol to cheat on Harold could have all manner of nasty consequences. It could send Harold spiralling into a depression that leads to a nervous breakdown, rendering him unable to give orders to his peasants, and seeing the entire kingdom grind to a halt. Worse, it could send him into a murderous rage. So naturally, I have been playing Cupid, trying to push them together for walks and chats and even a spot of wolf hunting. Now though, they're finally at it, which hopefully means I can focus on all the kingdom's other problems, like the rapidly depleting food supply, and that big camp of bandits threatening a raid.

Norland, like *Crusader Kings*, is a game about building a glorious medieval empire on the backs of deeply human feudal

lords, whose unstable emotions and courtly bickering is enough to manage before you consider the many peasants who live and die at their whim. Yet where *Crusader Kings* communicates this through the medium of global grand strategy, *Norland* does it through a *RimWorld*-style colony simulation, one where every in-game event – from breakfast to beheading – is visibly depicted in real time.

The result is a vivid representation of how the needs of a community can rub against the caprice of those in power. The tiniest of events can spark personal vendettas and even wars that will dog your domain for weeks. It is an engrossing story engine, albeit one that can, at times, frustrate from a play perspective.

At its most fundamental level, *Norland* is a classic management sim, one of planting buildings and generating resources and connecting production chains, all of which goes toward growing a population of simulated humans. You need to build houses for your peasants to sleep in, farms and lumber mills for them to raise crops and process wood, mills and breweries for them to turn rye and rutabagas into flour and moonshine, and civic buildings like taverns and temples to satisfy their higher needs.

The key twist in *Norland*'s management side is that outside of a few actions like construction, you don't issue orders directly to peasants. Instead, you assign tasks to your lords, who will then either carry them out directly or delegate to peasants. No building can operate without instructions from a lord, for example, so they spend much of their time wandering between production buildings shaking their fists at the lower orders.

LORDING IT UP

As you can imagine, a lord's calendar can get pretty packed, to the point where they'd struggle to fit everything in if they were perfectly efficient robots. But they aren't robots. They're very much people, with needs and desires of their own.

These are not idly chosen words. Needs and desires are both important, individual in-game mechanics. Lords need to eat and sleep. They need to socialise with other characters, particularly those they have good relationships with. If

PLAYED IT

HAROLD AND CAROL'S LOVE LIFE HAS BEEN THREATENING THE STABILITY OF MY KINGDOM



✗ they're religious, they need to pray and confess their sins to priests. And as already discussed, they need to have sex on a regular basis.

Fitting all these alongside a lord's schedule is tricky, but they all have to be tended to at some point. Going without a need for too long will impact a lord's mood, and if a lord is unhappy, they'll refuse to perform their tasks. But unsatisfied needs can also lead them to make reckless decisions. And these decisions can spiral out in wild ways. Remember I mentioned the perils of cheating? Well, in a game of *Norland*, I played as the happily married King Barry and his wife Marie. Happily, that is, until Marie cheated on Barry with a peasant.

This sent Marie into a religious crisis, until her shame led her to reveal her affair to Barry. The king took the news... poorly, divorcing Marie and remarrying to another lord called Sasha. Divorce didn't stop the wound from festering, until both Barry and Sasha burned with desire to kill Marie.

Again, the word 'desire' isn't idly chosen. Desires are essentially one off needs that appear procedurally based on certain parameters. They can range from wanting to eat meat to, well, wanting to murder your ex-wife.

In this case, Marie's death would have been extremely bad for my kingdom, because Marie was my chief researcher and knowledge dies with a lord unless it is shared in conversation with other lords. So to sate Barry and Sasha's bloodlust in a (slightly) less dangerous way, I had them both challenge Marie to individual duels. Lords can be killed in duels, but it isn't guaranteed, and in this case, honour was served without any deaths. Granted, Marie was beaten up twice and spent three days in an alcoholic stupor, but she emerged from all this misery alive and sanguine about the whole affair. At least, until she decided she wanted to murder Barry's sister-in-law, forcing me to set up another duel in which Marie got killed.

RIVAL NATIONS

Outside of your village is an entire continent of rival nations that you can trade with, ally with, marry into, and of course conquer. These nations will in turn

ally and fight with each other, at least until they are fallen upon by the rampaging tribal horde that emerges a few hours into the game, itself a whole other problem you'll need to solve at some point. Overall, this layer of *Norland* is painted with broader strokes than the colony sim, but frankly that's a relief, as having to manage the geoscape at the same level of depth would make *Norland* incredibly finicky.

Indeed, simply climbing the vast, wobbling Jenga tower that is your kingdom to compete at that level is no small feat. There are dozens of plates for your lords to spin, and a bad day can result in one or several lords dropping all of theirs. For the most part, such disasters are fun rather than frustrating. But there are a couple of systems that seem primed toward gumming up the works.

Chief among these is rings. Your lords don't concern themselves with paltry gold. Instead, their currency is Holy Rings which they wear to display their status. Unlike all other resources, rings cannot be made or earned. They can only be purchased from the wandering trader who rocks up to your kingdom every few days.

This makes them a tightly controlled resource, one that all of your lords covet. At a general level, the more rings a lord has, the happier they are. But rings are also the source of the most common 'desires'. Lords will constantly yearn to possess X number of rings, or want to avoid having the fewest rings in the family. Generally speaking, I think the Holy Rings are a cool idea, but ring management just isn't much fun. Your lords constantly want rings, but they also constantly want to do things like have affairs with peasants and absolve their sins. As such, lords often end up in deteriorating cycles of ring-related sadness that you often can't address because they're such a limited item.

There are a few other nits I could pick, like research being a little too slow. But on the whole, *Norland* is a strong Early Access release. It already feels like a complete experience, and watching CK-style dramas play out in real time is pretty darned compelling. If you're still unconvinced, I'll leave you with one last tale of ribaldry. Characters who get pregnant in-game will start to suffer from morning sickness, and one day King Barry's new wife Sasha blew chunks all over her bed. Moments later, Barry walked in, stripped off, and lay down beside Sasha in the big green pool of sick. "Oh God no," I sighed. "They're having sex."

Rick Lane



Battles are fairly straightforward, though experience and equipment can make up for lack of numbers.

MARIE WAS BEATEN UP TWICE AND SPENT THREE DAYS IN AN ALCOHOLIC STUPOR



ABOVE: Brawls, priests, and music. You get it all at King Barry's hall.

LEFT: Nice village. Shame about the crop blight.



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COURAGE AND HONOUR

Boasting the most cinematic, epic-in-scope depiction of WH40K to date, **WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2** captures the immensity of being an unstoppable angel of death like never before

By Robert Jones



TITUS RENDS THE TYRANID HIVE
TYRANT IN TWO WITH HIS CHAINWORD.
THEN THE CARNIFEX ARRIVES



O

n the far reaches of my vision, on a distant horizon littered with bursts of flame, crumbling Imperial structures, and the remnants of heavily armoured vehicles, I see the Tyranid horde approaching. A mass of writhing carapace plates, talons, tails and bile, the horde swarms across the pock-marked battlefield as bunches of entrenched Imperial Guard begin frantically firing from dugouts to the left and right of me.

But be under no illusion, these small squads of Astra Militarum are massively outnumbered. Just as I am, Demetrian Titus, formerly one of the Ultramarines' greatest heroes, dispatched to Avarax to help hold back the tide. As the Xeno mass scurries to and up the derelict, fractured walls of the Imperial base Titus has been tasked with defending, their controlling hive mind directing them to devour all who stand in their way, the scale of the task ahead suddenly becomes apparent. This is an army against but a handful of men. It's a good job, therefore, that Titus along

with his two Space Marine battlebrothers, Chairon and Gadriel, are not just Space Marines of the revered Ultramarines chapter, the foremost of the founding Space Marine legions, but Primaris Space Marines, even bigger, tougher and deadlier variants of mankind's most elite weapon. Standing nearly ten-feet tall in their armour and armed to the teeth with Chainswords, Bolter Rifles and Meltaguns, among other armaments, these are truly the Emperor of Mankind's angels of death.

And then they've breached the walls. They will be upon us in seconds. I equip Titus' Heavy Bolter and rain death upon on the Tyranid vanguard. The .998 calibre bolts shred the Tyranid Hormaguant frontline troops, ripping limbs from bodies, exploding skulls, and cracking armoured plates. They go down in a screeching orgy of blood, corpses piling high in a row. But the Tyranid numbers appear endless and despite hundreds being felled by Titus and his fellow men, they just keep coming, scrambling over their fallen dead.

RIP AND TEAR

I power up Titus' Chainsword, a brutal sword with rotating ranks of sharpened teeth powered by a promethium engine, and utilising his Jump Pack to generate height and momentum, charge into the front line. The impact alone crushes a pack of several Tyranids immediately, sending those on the periphery spiralling away back into the writhing horde, and then I get swinging, carving through wave

FAR LEFT: Wading into the Tyranid horde, Chainsword in hand, is such a rush.

upon wave of enemies, the angry, grinding teeth of the Chainsword ripping and tearing with wild abandon.

A Hormaguant launches itself out of the swarm towards Titus' head, but I see it coming and, reacting in time, I successfully counter its lunge, pivoting my body and grabbing its tail as flies by. With a huge swing, I slam the beast into the ground, shattering it in one blow. To the left and right of me, Chairon and Gadriel are getting stuck into the horde themselves, all the while bolter fire screams by overhead courtesy of the Imperial Guard. Above us, a cloud of flying Tyranids intercept an Imperial ship midflight, while from the battlements far above us anti-air cannons thunder shots into the sky.

Emerging from the swarm, a Hive Tyrant appears and launches an unblockable attack on Titus. I roll backwards, narrowly avoiding its razor sharp striking limbs and then, switching to his Bolt Gun, I counter with a barrage of shots, the bolts cracking into the torso of the Hive Tyrant and causing it to flinch in pain. Pressing my advantage, I drive forward through lesser Tyranids and bring my Chainsword down upon the Tyrant. It blocks the first strike, countering with its own that catches Titus on the shoulder, but the Primaris Space Marine's follow-up blow isn't, slicing down upon its head. Despite its armour, Titus rends the Tyranid Hive Tyrant in two with his Chainsword. Then the Carnifex arrives.

This hulking, savage, battering ram of a Tyranid charges through the swarm, crushing many lesser Xeno underfoot, and slams into Titus, sending him flying backwards. Despite Titus' Primaris Space Marine conditioning, this was a crushing blow, and I find myself now on the verge of being downed. But for a Space Marine, retreat is never an option, so grabbing a Meltagun, I advance pummelling the Carnifex with round after round of super-heated plasma, melting its exoskeleton and carapace plating.

It screeches in pain but keeps swinging its huge claws at Titus, as well as Chairon and Gadriel, who have joined me in fending off this imposing Tyranid juggernaut. Under prolonged, concentrated fire, the Carnifex eventually drops, crushing another Hive Tyrant. For now, this Imperial position on the besieged Avarax has been defended, but for Titus and his fellow Space Marines, the war against the Tyranid invaders has just begun.

ADEPTUS ASTARTES

Famous Space Marine legions



ULTRAMARINES

The most famous and revered of all the Space Marine chapters. This chapter also boasts the purest geneseed genetic material from which all Space Marines are made.



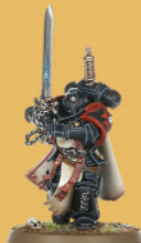
BLOOD ANGELS

The Blood Angels are feared for both their characteristic blood lust and the cursed geneseed they carry in their veins. They are known for their prowess in battle and many heroic deeds.



SPACE WOLVES

Also known as the Wolves of Fenris, are known for their anti-authoritarian ways and radical interpretation of the Codex Astartes, the doctrine Space Marine chapters work from.



BLACK TEMPLARS

A Space Marine legion known for undertaking the longest Imperial Crusade in the Imperium of Man in order to prove their loyalty to the Emperor of Mankind.



THERE IS ONLY WAR

Space Marine 2's epic scope visualised

SWARM

Space Marine 2's Tyranid horde swarm tech is jaw-dropping. Hundreds upon hundreds of aliens can be on screen at any one time, communicating not just how outnumbered Titus and his men are, but the scale of the war and their challenge.

JETPACK

The Jump Pack in *Space Marine 2* delivers a whole new verticality to environments, allowing Titus to manoeuvre and fight vertically, as well as horizontally. Getting the drop on enemies from above, obliterating them with a Thunder Hammer, never gets old.

VISTAS

No matter the environment Titus is in, their sense of scale is frequently massive, with vistas stretching away to the horizon. Neatly, enemy swarms can often be seen in the far distance, contributing to the idea that your battle is just part of a much wider war.

STRUCTURES

Looming over Titus and his fellow warriors, themselves giants compared to regular humans, are megastructures that drip with grimdark detailing. From Imperium bases to ruined cities and onto towering flora and alien monoliths, the far future is an imposing place.

THE GAME'S AI DIRECTOR CONTROLS THE FLOW OF CO-OP MULTIPLAYER MISSIONS



Space Marine 2 is a third-person action-shooter that has been built with immensity of scale in mind. Indeed, my overriding takeaway from going hands-on with *Space Marine 2*, both in its Campaign story mode and its co-op Operations mode, is that I've never seen the grimdark future of Warhammer 40,000 depicted better in games in terms of communicating the sheer scope of the universal war humanity finds itself in. The scale of the environments, characters, battles and narrative stakes, are simply epic. If you once dreamed of galactic-sized wars between the remnants of humanity and aliens from beyond the stars and the Warp, this is the game you've been waiting for.

But, being candid, scale alone does not a good gaming experience make. So, how does *Space Marine 2* play? You control returning hero Titus from a now almost old-school third-person over-the-shoulder perspective. It's

comfortable and familiar, immediately bringing back memories of the original game and, maybe more aptly, a *Gears of War*. Crucially, though, that is where the similarities to that series end, as there's no real cover system to speak of in *Space Marine 2*, with the game more concerned with the player staying on the front foot in constant assault. Combat, as the first game, involves both ranged shooting and close-quarters melee, with a fluid transition back and forth between both not just typical of each encounter, but desired. This is because every melee execution of an enemy replenishes your armour meter, essentially topping up your health and allowing you to keep fighting. It reminded me of the recent *Doom* reboots, where glory kills lead to more health and armour being dropped. I've got to say, *Space Marine 2*'s finishing moves look awesome, and I never tired of watching Titus rip a Tyranid in two. Where *Space Marine 2*



has markedly expanded on this basic gameplay loop, though, compared to the original game, is in the addition of light Soulslike elements, with parries, perfect parries, counter strikes, and dodges available to Titus. The potential for these actions are shown on-screen with the now expected coloured flashes around enemies as they gear up an attack. Red to dodge, white to parry. Time things right and you can counter, either with a melee or close-range Bolter attack. The animations on these counters are very slick and, combined with the variety of ranged and melee attacks, lead to *Space Marine 2* often feeling like a gloriously gratuitous ballet of violence and bloodshed. These additions felt natural, making combat in *Space Marine 2* slicker and more modern compared to *Space Marine*.

OPERATIONS MODE

The other gameplay mode I got to sample during my hands-on was Operations, which allows up to three players to co-operatively take on smaller, run-based side missions together. The objectives for these





missions are typically tied into the main campaign's story, often linking into events that Titus experiences, rounding out the story.

In this mode the player can choose from six different Space Marine classes to play as, including Tactical, Assault, Vanguard, Bulwark, Sniper and Heavy. The choice of class mainly affects

loadout, with the Heavy class for example capable of wielding heavy ranged weapons, while the Sniper coming with the a deadly long-range rifle and strong stealth capabilities, and the Bulwark coming with a damage-absorbing shield, for example. A party with a good mix of classes worked best during our play session, which saw the

ABOVE: Thousand Sons Havocs wielding autocannons, heavily armoured elite Space Marines capable of taking and dealing huge damage.

FAR LEFT: Titus has a wide-range of weapons to choose from in order to bring death to his enemies.

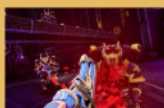
team dispatched to the jungle planet of Kadaku. Completing missions unlocked currency to spend on new weapons, gear and cosmetics, as well as unlocking class perks, with each class having its own unique perk tree.

As a PvE mode, Operations is run by *Space Marine 2*'s AI director. The game's AI director controls the flow of co-op multiplayer missions, altering enemy type, placement and strength on the fly according to how the team is performing. I couldn't really get a feel for this in my limited time in Operations mode, though, but I could see how it could lead to more cinematic, engaging gameplay. That will add to replayability no doubt.

Overall, then, I've come away from playing *Space Marine 2* with high hopes. I've certainly not seen enough to make a judgement on final quality, but I've been blown away by *Space Marine 2*'s epic scale, and impressed by its slick combat. If Saber can deliver on a gripping narrative for Titus, as well as hit with its PvP multiplayer, then we may be looking at one of the best WH40K games ever made. ■

GRIMDARK GREATNESS

Other notable WH40K games to play today



WARHAMMER 40,000: BOLTGUN

Scoring a very tasty 85% in PC Gamer magazine, *Boltgun* is the retro WH40K boomer shooter we were all waiting for. Fast-paced and hyper violent.



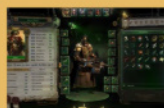
WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

A markedly better, more finished game than when it originally launched, *Darktide* captures the grimdark tone and atmosphere of WH40K perfectly.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR

The original *Dawn of War* remains the crown jewel in the RTS series, and boasts the neat base-building aspect later entries in the series sidelined.



WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER

This unique foray into the WH40K universe lodged a score of just 59% on review. However, an overhaul in February this year made over 1,800 changes.

DEVELOPER DIARY

FOR THE EMPEROR

Speaking with Brand & Creative Manager on Space Marine 2, Yann François

To get the inside scoop on how Saber Interactive has approached developing *Space Marine 2*, we spoke to the game's brand & creative manager, Yann François about Ultramarines, Tyranid hordes and a grimdark far future where there is only war.

How did you approach building on the first *Space Marine*?

Space Marine was a huge success in its time. So when Saber and Games Workshop met to decide what we can do right now together, the idea was to try to recreate the powerful fantasy behind *Space Marine*, which is the powerful fantasy of embodying a superhuman warrior fighting across the galaxy against all the horrors that are straight through the galaxy, and threatening mankind.

The only thing that was missing [to do that], was the technology itself. That was where Saber came in, because they had a tremendous success with *SnowRunner* and *World War Z* [where] they were able to multiply hordes of hundreds of zombies on the screen. So they decided to use that technology, and try to adapt to the universe of Warhammer 40,000, to recreate a tremendous spectacle – a really massive show, you know, to deliver this fantasy of embodying a warrior able to fight hundreds of enemies at the same time without being afraid of death.

The technology behind the Tyranid hordes in *Space Marine 2* is very impressive. How easy was it to adopt and balance for the player?

It took quite a long time to find the right balance between being able to show hundreds of enemies coming at you, but Tyranids are not zombies. They have their own behaviour, and their own way of moving, and their own way of attacking the player. Tyranids in Warhammer lore are a hivemind faction. And how do you find the perfect balance between a rushing

DEV PROFILE



Yann François

TITLE
Brand & creative manager

FAVOURITE GAMES
Silent Hill, Half-Life, Shadow of the Colossus, Dark Souls

FAVOURITE SPACE MARINE LEGION
Blood Angels

enemy coming at you that has its own intelligence behind it? You have to find the perfect balance between spectacle and being impressive, and not being too invading for the player. So, yeah, it's been quite a challenge to find the perfect balance between an impressive show, and letting the player find himself to do the right skill to push back the invasion.

There's a distinctive tone to Warhammer 40,000 that's hard to get right. How did the team get in the right mind-set?

I would say it's a very intricate marriage between Saber's writers, its art creative director, which is Oliver Hollis-Leick, as well as Games Workshop. Because it's a licence, it's very precise on the nature of what is good, and what is OK to tell, and what is OK to show. Because Games Workshop has such a huge fanbase we can't take all the liberties that we want. We have to find the right path to deliver a story that is new. Because Titus' story is absolutely new. It's not been created in the board game; it's been created for the new game. So you have to find the right balance between 'new' and respectability to the initial materials.

Titus, the hero of the first *Space Marine* game, returns here. What did you want to do with his story?

The ending of the first *Space Marine* was quite abrupt because Titus was supposed to push back the Ork

invasion for the Imperium. In the end, it was a huge heresy by his leadership, and he was sent on by the inquisition into exile. Now, many, many years have passed by, and he's coming back reassigned to a new unit with Chairon and Gadriel, without explaining to them why he's here, and why he has been transformed into a Primaris Marine, which is some kind of super version of a space marine. He has been genetically modified for... well, it's a secret. If you imagine that you are a super veteran, or some kind of living legend that has been gone for many, many years, and you suddenly become the lieutenant of two Primaris Marines, without telling them why, and what you are supposed to do – you are raising some doubts among your ranks. So the story of Titus, in this episode, will be some kind of getting back your fame, and getting back the trust of your men to lead in the never-ending war against the aliens and the traitors.

Finally, let's talk about *Space Marine 2*'s scale. Was the wider depiction of war always a priority for the team?

You know, it's always a struggle to find the right tone and the right scale for this type of game. When you are reading about Space Marines, Ultramarines and Primaris – you discover that those are superhuman on a really crazy scale. They measure up to two metres or three metres. They have two or three hearts functioning. Because they are the only humans able to support such a heavy armour, and that scale of damages.

So the idea of the game was to match the power behind the Space Marines, and the threat that you will be facing. And this threat is symbolised on both sides, by the enemy and the décor around you. Because if you're involving a giant – the giant has to sense the scale of war. And this war can be sensed through the environment.

That was quite a challenge for the team, to say, "OK, those are almost invincible. How do we create a challenge around it?" Because it could be super-easy. You know, you're attacking, and you are moving straight through, and stepping on them. That is what led to the choice of creating a multiplayer of up to three players. Because many people asked, "Why is it not up to four players?" They tried it, and they realised that it was too easy with four players. It was a massacre. So three was a good number, to find a good balance. ■

BELOW: It's not just Tyranids who you will need to best in *Space Marine 2*.

FAR RIGHT: Boosting around with a jetpack lets you get the drop on foes.





IT'S ALWAYS A
STRUGGLE TO
FIND THE
RIGHT TONE
AND THE
RIGHT SCALE
FOR THIS
TYPE OF GAME



PC GAMER

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WEIRD LITTLE GAMES

After **MANOR LORDS**, **BALATRO** and **ANIMAL WELL**,
it's clear that the future of PC gaming, more
than ever before, belongs to weird little games

By Evan Lahti





lead blanket of precarity is still draped over the people who make up the global game industry, having seen thousands of their peers laid off, prestige studios shut down by their multi-trillion-dollar owners, and an economy for games where success doesn't mean survival.

But there is at least one clear and heartening message being shouted from the rooftops, if you're willing to look up from the bottomless pit to hear it: the future belongs to weird-ass little games. Want proof? Here's this year's bounty of unconventional breakouts: *Abiotic Factor*, *Balatro*, *Palworld*, *Animal Well*, *Manor Lords*, *Pacific Drive*, *Content Warning*, *Deep*

IN MY 16 YEARS AT PC GAMER, I'VE NEVER SEEN A SPAN OF UNDERDOG HITS THIS DENSE

Rock Galactic: Survivor and *Backpack Battles*.

This isn't a cute trend, it's seismic activity. In my 16 years at PC Gamer, I've never seen a span of underdog hits this dense, led in number and time by *Palworld*'s one million sales in eight hours, then eight million in six days. Since January 1, we've been averaging an unexpected breakout game every 16 days.

It's not a coincidence that these newcomers are all from small studios and/or small publishers. Smaller studios are usually more willing to take creative risks than games produced by publicly traded

companies. Although there are exceptions, historically it hasn't panned out well when a small studio proclaims it's making the next *Call of Duty*; they compete by

being weirder than Ubisoft or EA or Blizzard are willing to be.

For the biggest games, the fact that they take the longest to develop is a strategic weakness. *Diablo III* and *IV* took about a decade each. *Starfield* took eight years. *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* took seven. A new *GTA* or *Fallout*, as some fans were lamenting as they watched a very



CONTENT WARNING

DEV: Skog, Zorro, Wilnyl, Philip, thePetHen
PUB: Landfall Publishing

YouTube is hell, but no, really.

BACKPACK BATTLES

DEV: PlayWithFurcifer
PUB: PlayWithFurcifer, IndieArk

Diablo, but hold the dungeons, just give us the inventory, please.





ABIOTIC FACTOR

DEV: Deep Field Games
PUB: Playstack

Half-Life co-op sleepover inside Black Mesa where you make alien soup for your friends, developed by a team of ten in New Zealand.

PALWORLD

DEV: Pocketpair

PUB: Pocketpair

What if Pikachu had a gatling gun, and the Pikachus you didn't Pika-choose could be Pika-enslaved?



PACIFIC DRIVE

DEV: Ironwood Studios

PUB: Kepler Interactive

Resident Evil, but in a big car.

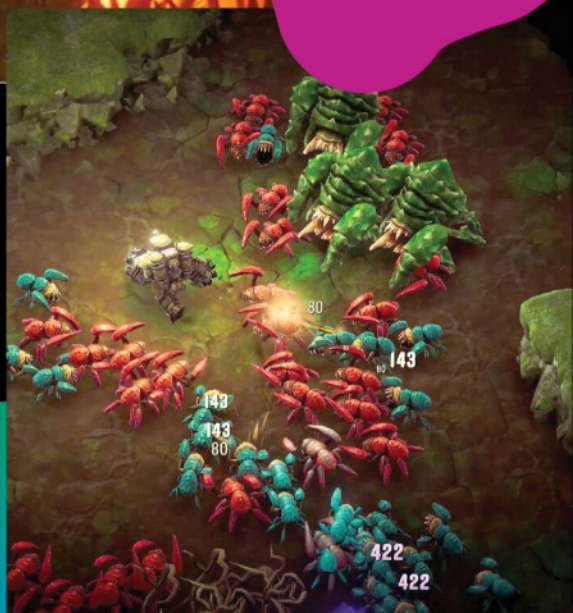




DEEP ROCK GALACTIC: SURVIVOR

DEV: Funday Games
PUB: Ghost Ship

Vampire Survivors, but *Deep Rock Galactic*.



✦ good TV adaption in April, might take a decade. At that glacial cadence, you have to wonder how any big game can seize on any trend at all.

Compared to these slow-steering frigates, small games can nimbly point their sails to harness the ever-shifting winds of interest. *Content Warning*, which dropped in March, capitalised on the still-glowing aura around *Lethal Company*, itself the work of a single, 21-year-old developer who was inspired by other weird-and-small games, *Among Us* and *Phasmophobia*. *Content Warning* was, to the astonishment of many developers, mostly created in a single month during a trip to South Korea. *Content Warning* understood that audiences, partly thanks to how ubiquitous Discord has become since the pandemic, are very comfortable impulse-buying a \$10 co-op horror thing that will make them and their friends laugh.

TOPPLING TITANS

Replayability is one of the quietly big trends at play here. Compared to five or ten years ago, players expect more kinds of games – singleplayer or not – to be highly replayable. This expectation has urged most of the world's biggest developers and publishers to create projects with five or ten-year lifespans, like *Destiny 2*, *Overwatch*, *Apex Legends* and *Rainbow Six Siege*.

To be played forever, these giant games must be continuously replenished with engaging new stuff and operate an always-evolving multiplayer mode, things that need tremendous resources to sustain. By comparison, the small games with 'forever replayability' tend to rely on systems-led design, the roguelike form, or things like procedural level generation, like *Spelunky 2*'s 99-level Cosmic Ocean finale. Because small studios have this upfront infinite-replayability-without-infinite-content challenge, I think it leads many of them to cook up weirder, captivating ideas like *Phasmophobia*'s security camera booth, *Balatro*'s satisfying jackpots, or *Content Warning*'s use of an open-source screen recorder to stitch video clips together into real, sharable webm files.

THIS TREND WILL CONTINUE, BECAUSE THE CONDITIONS THAT CREATED IT CONTINUE

The other (tiny) elephant in the room is: small games fit into our lives, which are already occupied by one or two big games. In 2023, according to one data firm's analysis, 60 percent of time played went to games six or more years old. At PC Gamer we sometimes call these games 'skyscraper games,' because stuff like *Dota 2*, *Escape From Tarkov*, *LoL*, *Counter-Strike*, or *WoW* feel like a skyline of games that are permanently in view.

If you're one of the many people who have sworn a vow to one of these 1,000-hour titans (mine's *Hunt: Showdown*), you know it's easier to fit a small, weird game into your routine than something skyscraper-shaped. I don't have to persuade my entire Discord server to change their lifestyle in order to enjoy *Balatro*.

A NEW AGE

The enthusiastic reception that small games have enjoyed in the first half of 2024 isn't something that will come and go. It's a full-blown age. This trend will continue, because the conditions

that created it continue. These conditions include: the tools used to make games are more accessible than ever; anyone can publish a game on Steam for \$100, press and video creators' incentive to react to the newest unexpected hit enables domino-effect popularity and the tendency for games to riff on what came before them means audiences' tastes rapidly evolve. Plus, in terms of visibility, digital distribution is an ecosystem in which the smallest studios enjoy much greater parity with the biggest studios in the world, compared to the decades when most of us bought games from retail stores, and the PC is the platform where small games tend to be born, as gaming's space for experimentation

My takeaway, to be sure, isn't that big games are doomed. As I said above, I think there will continue to be a relatively static set of 20 or so service games that feel like permanent fixtures, even if many of us are feeling exhausted by the shape of their business models.

As I think about this trend, I can't ignore that the year's biggest surprise ✦

Weird Little Games

blockbuster, *Helldivers 2*, became Sony's highest-selling PC game ever by upending our notion of what a triple-A, PlayStation-published service game should look like. In 2023, Arrowhead numbered about 100 developers – not small, but a fraction of the 2,000-dev legions that make some of gaming's biggest franchises. You can see Arrowhead's proud legacy of making quirky games everywhere in *Helldivers 2*, in its weird idea to appoint a game master as the puppeteer behind its sci-fi parody, pseudo-MMO, systems-driven co-op shooter with weird lightning guns, weird marketing that spreads disinformation about itself, and a weirdly forgiving battle pass.

INDIE MAGIC

Another recent game that sat, uncomfortably for some, at the crossroads between big and small was *Dave the Diver*, the simple-but-deep, endearingly quirky diving and cooking game which won our Best Design award in 2023. The 'is it indie?' discourse that circled *Dave the Diver*'s TGA indie nomination last year was irritating because so many commentators were dwelling in semantics when

YOU CAN SEE ARROWHEAD'S PROUD LEGACY OF MAKING QUIRKY GAMES

something much more interesting had happened: a colossal game publisher made something that felt like it came from a small studio.

It was a creative achievement that Nexon, a \$14B company, got out of its own way enough to produce a game that genuinely felt like the vision of a small group of people. The mixed track record of big publishers spinning up indie game labels shows us how hard it is to make something as singular as *Dave the Diver*, with or without the backing of a big company. Riot's now-closed Forge initiative produced five *League of Legends* spin-offs in four years. 2K's

Private Division is unravelling before our eyes, despite having made good moves to publish games like *Rollerdrome*, *Penny's Big Breakaway* and iconic indie

Kerbal Space Program. The Square Enix Collective had a hit with *Powerwash Simulator*, and has been around for a decade.

The small game spirit is alive and well. It's a sign of vibrancy that modest studios are able to punch above their weight as they have in 2024. And it's a trend that I don't see stopping any time soon. ■



BALATRO

DEV: LocalThunk

PUB: Playstack

Poker, but insane, from a first-time developer based in Canada's Saskatchewan.

MANOR LORDS

DEV: Slavic Magic

PUB: Hooded Horse

Medieval citybuilder where you might find yourself micromanaging 14 families in order to produce bread.





ANIMAL WELL

DEV: Billy Basso

PUB: Bigmode

Metroid, but you're always the ball.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

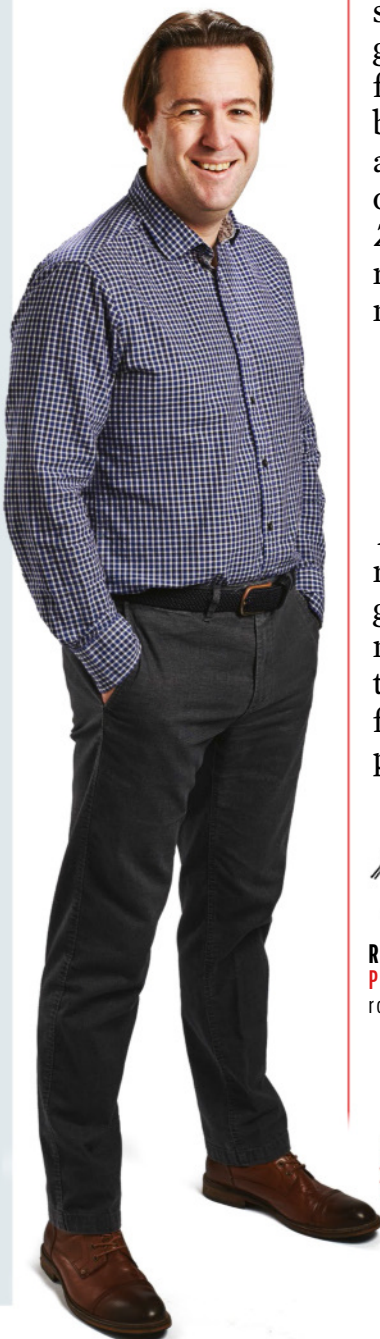
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Free to pay

This month the PC Gamer reviews machine tackles two free to play games that end up scoring at diametrically opposed ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, we've got *Once Human*, a stunningly good free to play game where you can build, farm, shoot and cooperate in a deep and rewarding MMO. Then, on the other hand, we've got *Zenless Zone Zero*, which our review describes brutally as raw marketing in game form, with everything designed around trends, targets and demographics. As well, of course, of prising your wallet open at every opportunity.

At the end of the day what these reviews show is that there's some great free to play games available, more than ever before, but getting the balance right between gamer fun and publisher profit is key to prolonged success.

R. Jones

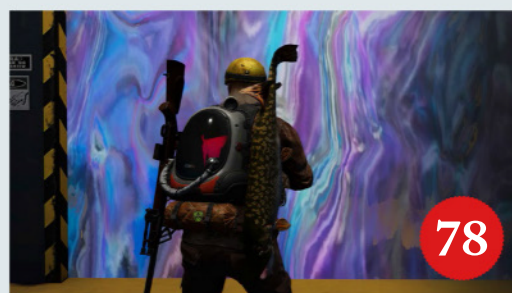
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PRINT EDITOR

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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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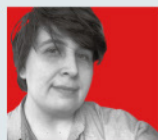
This month's god-slaying reviewers...



ABBIE STONE
Specialist in
Ancient firearms
Currently playing
Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn
This month
Killed many gods. Oh, and in *Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn* she...



TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Furious kicking
Currently playing
Anger Foot
This month
Raced around PC Gamer Towers kicking open doors and demanding chips.



KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Closing wallets
Currently playing
Zenless Zone Zero
This month
Learned a nugget of wisdom from a giant cat. Don't judge things with your butt. Fair.



DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
Chasing destiny
Currently playing
Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail
This month
Changed into a glam outfit before every cutscene. Vogue!



HEATHER NEWMAN
Specialist in
Opening wallets
Currently playing
Once Human
This month
Received a handmade wooden dining chair from a beaver. His name? Ron Gnowson.



SO-SO-SOULS

Self-described Soulslite **FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN** gets points for honesty

By Abbie Stone

A flintlock is a firearm from ye olden days which uses flint-striking ignition to fire. It's fallen out of fashion lately, mainly because it takes about 400 years to reload. The idea of trying to use one to kill several gods is pretty daunting. But I'd certainly rather take on that challenge than the far more terrifying one of being a Soulslike releasing less than a month after *Shadow of the Erdtree*. Maybe this game deserves a 90 just for bravery?

You play as Nor, an axe-wielding warrior trapped in a seemingly endless war with the living dead, because someone's unfortunately left the door to the afterlife open. After one of those classic attempts at fixing everything that actually makes it all much worse, Nor gets a nice big pile of guilt to motivate her through the rest of the adventure. More interestingly, she also meets and teams up with Enki, a 'tiny fox thing' that's also a god.

Enki introduces some novel powers, but let's get the more familiar stuff out of the way first. Combat is about locking onto foes, dodging, blocking, whacking them with your favourite axe when you get an opening, and ideally pulling off a parry and dealing out some lovely retaliation straight after. So far, so *Souls*, but there's a welcome shot of *Bloodborne* in here too: you have a firearm on your hip that you can use to interrupt attacks. Ammo replenishes after executing a few melee strikes, and let's thank every god that they went with that idea instead of realistic flintlock reloading.

WORTHY SHOT

There are a fair few firearms to be found, including an outstanding blunderbuss that blasts enemies off their feet. There's something wonderfully petulant about being on the back foot in an axe fight and then just pulling out your gun and pressing the 'I win' button, Indiana Jones-style. You also get a ranged weapon with more finite ammo than that's great

for picking off a few irritating enemies from afar before rushing in with your axe. Bonus points for including *Gears of Wars'* active reload, wherein you're rewarded for pressing reload at the exact right time.

There's a welcome shot of Bloodborne in here too: you have a firearm

Flintlock sells itself as a Soulslite and it is a more easygoing experience than being sentenced to death every three seconds in *The Lands Between*.

Nor and a growing caravan of campfire companions travel to different areas, where you're free to double jump about looking for enemies to hit, sidequests to complete, hamlets to liberate and resources to upgrade your weapons. All to help you with your main goal of killing whatever god is ruining life for everyone here.

Defeating enemies, completing quests, etc, earns you 'reputation'

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Action-RPG about shooting and bludgeoning the undead with axes

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50

DEVELOPER
A44 Games

PUBLISHER
Kelper Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-12500H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
playflintlock.com

which can be spent on unlocking skills, upgrading weapons, or a nice bit of clothes shopping. Die and you'll drop all your reputation and have one chance to return to the location of your death to get it all back. So the usual *Souls* structure then, incredibly overfamiliar but still effective enough at keeping the tension high and making you focus on every fight. There's also a smart system wherein a percentage bonus of reputation is increased steadily for executing attacks, dodging, and even sliding into battle. The percentage resets whenever you take a hit, but if you're playing perfectly, it can reward you with well over 100% of your earnings. A really nice idea – I wouldn't complain if that became a Soulslike staple.

Having a god on your team also livens things up. You get a double jump and an air dash, and can unlock triangular portals in the skies that send you zipping through the air. The long trudge back to where you died in a Soulslike is one of gaming's most miserable commutes so being able to soar to it instead is a welcome change. Plus it's fun steadily unlocking portals throughout a location until you're essentially flying about it like an axe-wielding prop plane.

GODS BE GOOD

You can have Enri attack your enemies, slowly building up an icy blue meter that lets you execute a devastating strike when it's full. There are some decent upgrades for him on the skill tree, too, like a very helpful power that raises foes into the air and leaves them stuck there while you get some delightfully cheap axe smacks in. *Flintlock's* not a particularly long game – just over 13 hours with all sidequests done too on standard difficulty – but that means the skill tree keeps giving you stuff at a nice clip.

So with a steady drip-feed of new powers to play with, its love of pretty

CAMPFIRE CREW

With friends like these, who needs personalities?



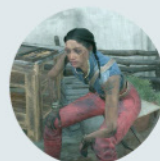
BAZ

Surprisingly dull and subdued for a man who's name sounds like he'd invite you on the most awful stag weekend of your life.



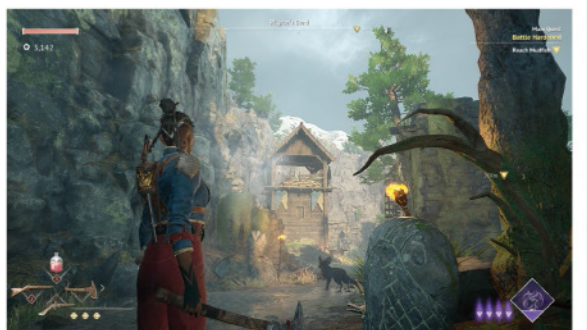
LUCA

Infected with some magical disease that's killing him, because his parents experimented on him for sinister purposes.

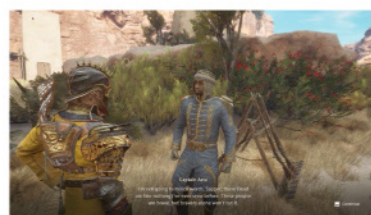
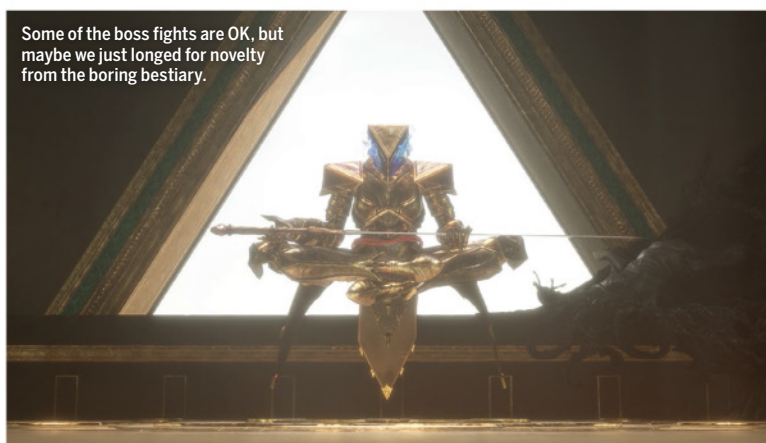


JOHARA

The only member of the caravan who outright doesn't like you, which also makes her the only one with any character.



Some of the boss fights are OK, but maybe we just longed for novelty from the boring bestiary.



ABOVE: Nor is easy to like, but tough to actually get invested in.

BELOW: It's by no means an ugly game, but it definitely lacks character.



Side Quest
Prizefight

Enter the arena ▾

Sull

Thank mercy for you, trench fitter. I haven't had this much fun since I had my father garroted.

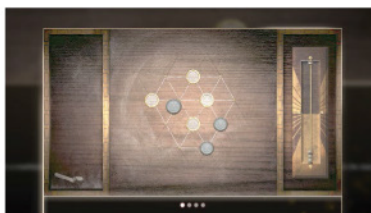


The game does enjoy a pretty purple lightning blast.



FAR RIGHT: Sorry arachnophobes, we probably shouldn't have included this screenshot.

BELOW: I'm not sure why the baristas are terrifying monster-people. Long hours?



Host

Bless you, girl; the Dead came over us like a wave. If it hadn't been for you...

Continue

purple super strikes and explosive red barrels everywhere, *Flintlock's* best bouts have enough spectacle to almost cover up a slightly stiff combat system. One with a parry window that's a little too generous on standard difficulty, a little too tight on the only difficulty higher. Even if you'd sooner eat a barrel of sawdust than attempt parrying in one of these games, moment to moment combat simply lacks the polish or versatility that usually makes mastering fighting in these games such a joy. This isn't up to the standards of even

pretenders to the throne like *Lords of the Fallen*, *Lies of P*, or this year's excellent *Another Crab's Treasure*.

This is where *Flintlock* might justifiably tap the Soulslike part of the sign. Look there's even a difficulty setting for players who just want to focus on the story! But it's borderline impressive how a story of soldiers in Napoleonic cosplay fighting vindictive gods can be so dull and seen-it-all-before. Pity the poor voice actors who get stuck with horrible in-universe slang like, "What in The Pits are you doing here?" Voice acting is tonally inconsistent throughout, too. Nor and her mentor figure give pared-back, grounded performances that clash with hammy NPC barks that sound like they're auditioning for the new *Fable*. One villain is so OTT that PlatinumGames would likely ask them to dial it back a bit, and some of the overly earnest monologuing towards the end is cringe ASMR.

I could probably overlook (overlisten?) this if there were any decent characters. But this story's so

impatient to get going that it doesn't take the time to introduce anyone properly. It does the classic dramatic character death intro trope, but with a character we met literally a matter of seconds ago. Never mind being moved by their passing, I'm struggling to remember their name. Nor and Enki have arcs but they feel

rushed. I'd recommend stabbing Nor in the back if you feel like it. Based on this game, she'll forgive you before you've even finished removing the knife.

SOULLESS

The three major areas you explore aren't exactly memorable either. Pretty, sure, but also very fantasy setting 101, though how easily you gentrify them is entertaining. You'll come across hamlets that have been overtaken by the dead and have to seek out a Big Bad to take down. Succeed, and all the dead disappear, all the buildings magically become nice again, and even the weather gets in on the fun and brightens up. Best of all, you'll unlock an, er, coffee shop where you'll get an extra healing flask for your trouble.

You can also unlock sidequests by talking to the barista about local rumours, just like real coffee shop baristas don't. Charmingly baffling why they didn't just use taverns, but more fantasy games for teetotalers can't be a bad thing, I suppose. Still, did anyone think Soulslikes were crying out for *Far Cry*-style outpost-clearing?

Some of the actual sidequests fare better, such as an entertaining excursion to a creepy manor. Slightly unorthodox parents were doing experiments on their children here

to try and achieve immortality. Now we're talking! Nor and Enki occasionally have a nice rapport, like in an exchange where he fruitlessly tries to teach her to pronounce something in the language of the gods ("You know what, let's just leave it"). But these are the exception, not the rule.

And I definitely could have done without certain endlessly repeated lines. "Sorted, as they say," says Enki for the millionth time after a combat encounter, making me wish I could introduce the axe to his skull too. "Never gets old," says Nor, yet again defining irony.

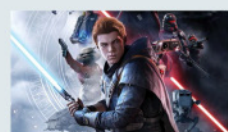
I'll at least forgive the recurring barks during resource-gathering ("What's this?" proclaims poor, forgetful Nor as I pick up the same iron I've been using to upgrade my axe for hours) because seeking out treasures is actually good fun. Collecting materials to upgrade weapons is, thankfully, not a case of wasting several hours chopping down trees. Instead you'll find a finite supply of the materials you need through exploration, rewarding you for searching areas thoroughly and with little of the challenge-free highlighting on the map that blights so many open-world games. It lets the fun navigation powers take centre stage, which frees me from tiresomely comparing it to *Dark Souls* every four seconds, even if the game can be a little inconsistent with what can be climbed on and what will send Nor tumbling to her doom.

You're left with a perfectly playable action-RPG that's hard to recommend because it's all been done better elsewhere. Want a less harsh *Souls*? Play *Another Crab's Treasure*. Finished all of FromSoftware's games and want more fantasy Soulslikes? Try *Lords of the Fallen* or the already outstanding Early Access release of *No Rest for the Wicked*. And did I mention a little expansion that scored 95% and came out a few weeks ago? I'll look back on *Flintlock's* sky-hopping, clever percentage system and *Bloodborne*-riffing shooting with a smile, but this one's otherwise a bit of a misfire. ■

The three major areas you explore aren't exactly memorable

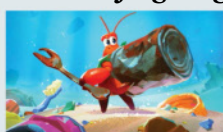
SOULSLITEN UP

Three Soulslikes that are more forgiving



STAR WARS: JEDI FALLEN ORDER

Far more concerned with fun Lightsaber battles than with sending you back to the last bonfire.



ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

One of 2024's best surprises lets you replace your shell with a gun if you're having trouble.



OOBLETS

Lovely dancing/farming game isn't even vaguely Soulslike, true, but why not play something pleasant for a change, hmmm?



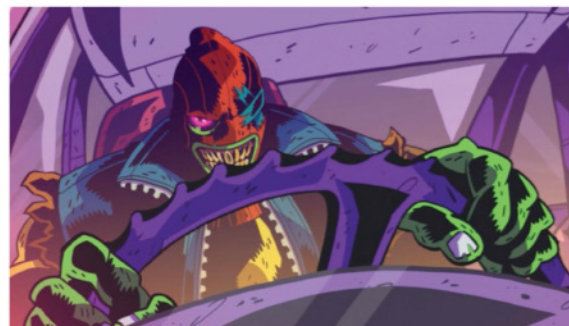
PC GAMER VERDICT

A perfectly serviceable slice of Soulslike fantasy that doesn't do enough to stand out from an overcrowded genre.

60



I don't know
if that's supposed
to go there.



RIGHT: Looks cosy.

FAR RIGHT: You don't
have to kick these
guys into goo if
you don't want.

BELOW: You leave a lot
of chaos in your wake.



FOOT GUY

ANGER FOOT is exactly the flow state first-person Hotline Miami I wanted it to be

By Ted Litchfield

I don't mean to pigeonhole *Anger Foot* by reducing it to *First-Person Hotline Miami*, but that's pretty much the elevator pitch for the game. Enemies go down in one hit, but so do you (with a few exceptions) and levels are tight little labyrinths where each room demands you clear it with maximum aggression and efficiency. The other top-line gameplay feature is your titular angry foot – not to be confused with the game's protagonist, *Anger Foot*.

You're a single button-press away from one of the better melee attacks I've ever seen in a game, an instant-kill boot in the face that comes out fast with a generous hitbox. Every fight begins with you blasting a door open with your clodhopper, often sending it flying right into an enemy.

I really dig how much *Anger Foot* leans into the kick thematically and mechanically. *Anger Foot* is a sneakerhead, with the game's plot kicked off by his prize collection getting stolen, and all of your power ups are different shoes: off-brand Birkenstocks for an extra life, Timbs for big head mode, and bullet-time sneakers are just a few examples. There are clear winners and losers in the arsenal, which might discourage experimentation, but that's where optional objectives come in to play.

Each mission has two challenges to complete in addition to just clearing the level. There are a bunch of different flavours of speedrun, playstyle and loadout restrictions, creative multikills, and even a few gag/secret objectives. I started off trying to nail every one, but the challenge quickly ramps up, and some even require power ups you can only unlock later in the campaign.

Anger Foot feels generous and substantial, and it's about the perfect length for an arcadey shooter – I rolled credits at about nine hours with maybe 40% of the optional objectives left to go. *Anger Foot* also keeps a lot in reserve for the back half, with most of my favourite

weapons, levels and enemies showing up in the third and fourth zones.

ADULT SWIM

I didn't go in expecting to love *Anger Foot*'s aesthetic, but it really grew on me. The vibe is 'adult comedy animation, but one of the actually funny ones'. Names like *Shit City* or *The Crime Minister* risk being goofy in a bad way or 'cringe' as the kids say, but the bits always landed for me – it all felt cheeky and fun, and not self-consciously edgy.

A huge thing to *Anger Foot*'s credit is that its jokes never overstay their welcome, and most of the comedy is

Every fight begins with you blasting a door open with your clodhopper

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fast-paced FPS with one of the most satisfying melee moves around

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Free Lives

PUBLISHER
Devolver

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-12600K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1978590/Anger_Foot/

strictly optional: there's no quirky mission control or Justin Roiland-voiced talking gun yapping at you all the time. There are interstitial non-combat levels full of NPCs to chat with, all of whom deliver three or four-line jokes that usually got me to chuckle, and if you feel annoyed, you can just kick them after with zero consequence. My favourite bits were countless sight gags that are easy to miss as you just zoom through the levels. It feels weird to say that a game brimming with gleeful scatological humour shows restraint, but it kinda does.

Anger Foot also has confoundingly good audio, and not just its pounding nightclub soundtrack. Most of the different shoes have unique footstep sounds, with the standouts being the whimsical honks of the clown shoes and the disquietingly wet slapping of your bare feet. That soundtrack may not be to all tastes – other members of PCG were not fans – but I found it fits *Anger Foot*'s hypebeast vibe.

My biggest issues were technical: there are 'fun' bugs like the charge attack or situationally high-recoil weapons launching you outside the level, but more frustrating was *Anger Foot*'s performance: some particularly busy rooms would leave the framerate chugging at 1440p on my RTX 3070 and 2021 i5.

None of that was a dealbreaker for me, though, and this feels like the sort of thing developer Free Lives can improve with patches. We've got a glut of indie shooters right now, but *Anger Foot* really sets itself apart from the pack: it's an easy recommendation whether you decide to tear through it once or really take the time to master its optional challenges. ■

SHOE RACK

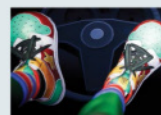
Some of my favourite loafers



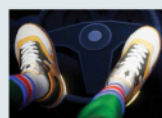
CHARGERS
Unlocks a brutal dash attack, my default shoe once I got them.



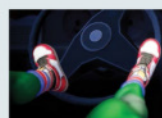
BRAIN EXPANDERS
Big head mode. Useful for headshot challenges.



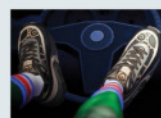
CLOWN SHOES
Squeaky footsteps and kicked enemies explode in confetti.



PUMPED UP KICKS
Shotgun-ifies every weapon you pick up.



SIZE THREES
You become a tiny little guy.



TIMESTOPPERS
Bullet time kicks in whenever you kick in a door.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Nails intense puzzle-like room clearing, while its sense of humour lands on the charming side of Adult Swim-style shows.

85

FREE TO PAY

A charming cast can't hide **ZENLESS ZONE ZERO's** true intentions

By Kerry Brunskill

Zenless Zone Zero adopts a zesty *Hi-Fi Rush* style of neon-accented sci-fi urbanism, a meaningless pushback on glossy businesses with political power. The graffiti is superficially artistic but has nothing to say, and the tech company sets up shop and then gives out neat trinkets.

Zenless Zone Zero is a reskinned revenue stream designed to target a similar-but-different audience to MiHoYo's other unstoppable gacha-style games *Genshin Impact* and *Honkai Star Rail*. It's been created to capture a gap in the market.

I'm not surprised. Gacha games like this are by design wallet-opening merch machines in disguise. The aim is to get me coming back every day to do a few things that make me feel good enough to consider using the shop. But because this will be for many of us our second or third experience of this too-familiar hamster wheel of #content from the same company, it rings hollow. *Zenless Zone Zero* is designed around trends, targets, and demographics.

It's all bright and colourful and very carefully designed to not look like it's trying to do anything other than be a fun new game. And I did have fun for the first few hours, even though *Zenless Zone Zero* spent a lot of it constantly jangling its keys at me and trying to insist another new slight remix of 'hitting things' or 'talking to people' was a completely new way to play.

There's an endless parade of missions to tackle, usually beginning with some roguelike-ish exploration. These segments represent the surrounding "dungeon" area as a lively maze of TV screens where dangerous monsters may give turn-by-turn chase, and mid-mission twists can drastically change the routes available to me. I was never excited by these sections, but I did want to

see what new twist on minimalist gaming they'd come up with next.

This is in sharp contrast with the active combat that often followed.

For a few bouts it did a good job of making my chosen team's swinging and shooting within a string of small, flat arenas look exciting and kinetic. I dodged lasers, and whenever I hit something numbers popped out, just like a modern action RPG demands.

Fighting something the size of a house shouldn't feel boring

TIME ATTACK

But it soon became clear that there was no rhythm or timing to it, and before long I got tired of the sound of my own mindless mouse clicking. No matter who I was playing as or what I was up against, fights always ended up as

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A charming cash shop cover

EXPECT TO PAY

Nothing/everything

DEVELOPER

MiHoYo

PUBLISHER

HoYoverse

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700HQ, GTX 1070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

zenless.hoyoverse.com

an endless routine of left clicking as rote combos went through the motions, with a quick prod of something else whenever I was told to. Fighting something the size of a house shouldn't feel boring, but it did here – another task ticked off a never-ending list of virtual chores.

I wouldn't have minded so much if this work hadn't kept dragging me away from the things I actually wanted to do for another round of filler. The mandatory side story I had to play through neither going anywhere nor relevant to the scenario I wanted to get back to. In-game incidents often led to another inescapable tutorial, these 'helpful' explanations usually opening another new category in the cash shop, expertly calibrated to lightly confuse with its mix of imaginary and real-world currencies.

Of course I don't have to buy anything. But there's no doubt everything would be much easier, if I made a few purchases. Just one. Or perhaps two. How about the £4.99 monthly subscription instead? Or why not unlock the full benefits of the season pass for a currently discounted £19.99 (a £9.99 tier is also available) and get more ability-enhancing materials that way?

More than anything, it makes me sad. The more I play it, the more obvious it is that not only is this not a good action RPG, but it also has no real interest in being one either. What *Zenless Zone Zero* actually wants is to be my new forever game. It will encourage me to have just one more go, all so it can extract as much money out of me as possible and then smile politely as it asks for more.

It may be free to play, but I can't afford to let ZZZ have its own way. ■

WHO'S A GOOD BOY?

No, not you – Howl



1 A GOOD DOG
Howl is the pawfect newsagent. Well dressed, alert, and adorable. Doesn't give change.

2 HEADLINE NEWS
Checking the paper makes it easy to keep up with big events in New Eridu.

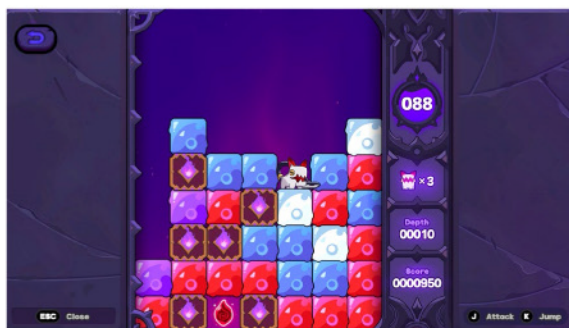
3 SCRATCH (NO SNIFF)
Once a day, Howl will even dish out a scratch card offering prizes.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Unfortunately *Zenless Zone Zero* from MiHoYo is a shallow, polished front for a relentless online store.

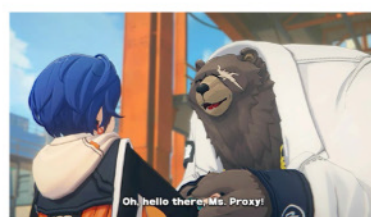
54

Some characters are... a little odd.



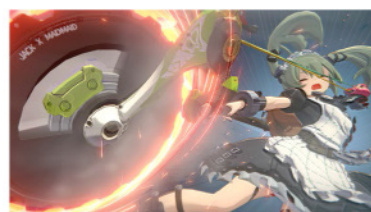
Wise

Don't judge things with your butt.



FAR LEFT: Everything in the shop is smothered in stylish packaging.

LEFT: Giant bear Ben's actually a real pussycat.

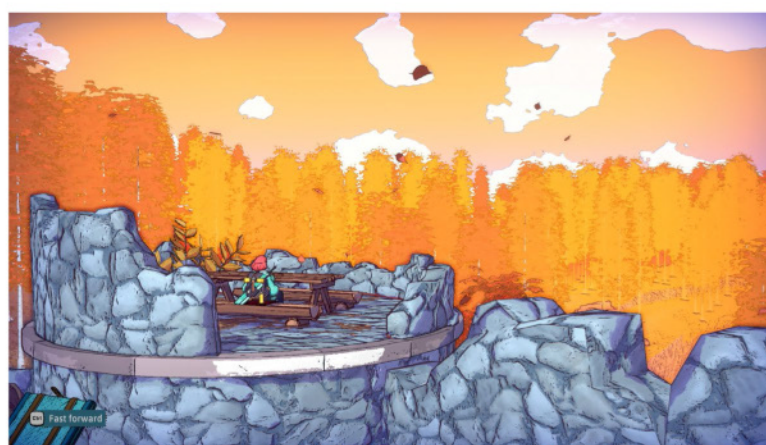
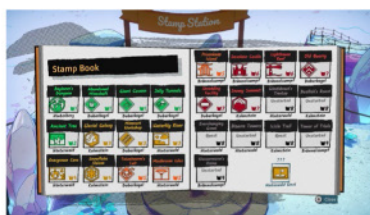


Sadly ZZZ looks better than it plays.



RIGHT: So I should quit my job?

FAR RIGHT: Clean forest air gives you stat boosts in real life, too.



Customers are the same everywhere.



D'OH!

DUNGEONS OF HINTERBERG is a vacation that's worth the trip

By Maddi Chilton

Luisa is a young lawyer from Vienna, and she's burned out. *Dungeons of Hinterberg* leans into millennial malaise and twists it: she's going to take a little break to find herself in a picturesque Austrian mountain town that's recently been rocked by the arrival of magic. Instead of ski slopes, Hinterberg has dungeons. Surely slaying monsters will help Luisa solve the fear of being in your 20s and not knowing what to do with your life?

The bulk of Luisa's days are spent in dungeons in four different regions, each of which grants Luisa two different magic powers she can use in combat or to solve puzzles. Combat is simple, which works in its favour: there are enough mobs that they could have become aggravating if I were not confident in Luisa's ability to slice them to pieces. Enemies are strange little gooey blob-creatures with masks modelled after Alpine mythology, and it's fun to realise that the horrible goat-thing that enjoys sticking its neck through the ground to torture me is in fact a legendary forest spirit.

I'll be the first to admit I'm not a puzzler – my tolerance for frustration is about the same as an eight-year-old's, and too many moving parts makes brain feel bad – but I found myself not just solving puzzles but enjoying them. They're enhanced by excellent level design and art direction. Doberkogel's mines are satisfying marble runs for a "big bomb ball" magic skill, and Hinterwald is an orange-hued perpetual autumn. The snowy mountains of Kolmstein are more one-note, but make up for it with very fun hoverboard traversal. Brunnelsumpf is less traditionally picturesque, but with some of the best dungeons, dollhouse-like castles that Luisa navigates with an infuriatingly fun jelly cube that's both a stepstool and a goldfish bowl (for putting enemies in time-out).

Puzzles are interrupted by occasional boss fights that are lacking

by comparison. Once you figure out how to chip away their health that's all you do, in overly-generous patterns less challenging than a generic dungeon mob.

The second half of every day is reserved for social activities

DAY TRIPPER

The second half of every day is reserved for social activities. Though this *Persona*-like setup is simple – choose a character to spend your evening with and receive stat

buffs/new abilities/extra scenes – it feels remarkably close to the actual social experience of being a tourist. There are locals and influencers and other slayers, eager dungeoneers and cynical teenagers. Everyone has their own relationship with Hinterberg and their own reasons for being

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A holiday in someone else's fantasy

EXPECT TO PAY

£24.99

DEVELOPER

Microbird Games

PUBLISHER

Curve Games

REVIEWED ON

Windows 11, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2060, AMD Ryzen 9 4900HS, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

dungeonsofhinterberg.com

there, which makes for a richer setting than if every NPC was focused on Luisa.

In the beginning Luisa only knows a few people, and her socialisation amounts to watching other slayers train or hovering awkwardly in the background of influencer videos. But as time goes on the scene opens up. There's a fun tension between staying in your comfort zone, spending evenings with someone you already know to dig deeper into your relationship tree, or to branch out and unlock photo mode by hanging with an obnoxious journalist or a cool combat ability by making small talk at a local sculptor's shop.

Some NPCs can be found at the same place daily, but others might disappear for an evening, or join a group at the campfire. Characters come to visit Luisa as she eats breakfast, and later when magic begins to spill into the streets, Luisa is one of the last to arrive on the scene: the other slayers have beaten her to it, defending their sanctuary in the best way they know how.

The strict time division of the days allows for a comfortable balance between socialising and exploration, and combat's occasional monotony is easy to ignore with so many fun puzzles. The choice to set *Hinterberg* in Austria, in a fantastical version of our real world, means that when the story approaches more serious topics like commercialisation or burnout there's no whiplash. Even when Luisa is hoverboarding down a mountainside it feels rooted in an experience we've all had – she's out there because she felt lost and needed to find herself. Like all good art, it comes from a place that's real – and tosses a bit of magic in. ■

HELP ALONG THE WAY

Veterans who can give you pointers



KLAUS

The celebrity dungeon trainer has some doubts about the management of the operation.



MARINA

A student on a budget, she came all the way from Spain to see Hinterberg's dungeons!

PC GAMER VERDICT

Dungeons of Hinterberg is a beautiful puzzler – and a satisfying riff on the Austrian tourist economy.

84

WOLS ON TOUR

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL provides fresh adventure with unexpected tears

By Daniella Lucas

Endwalker was the conclusion of ten years worth of world building and story that culminated in a universe-ending threat. It was a moment for the MMO ages that saw the Warrior of Light pushed to their limits and brought a close to the Hydaelyn and Zodiark saga. Now the next expansion for Final Fantasy XIV is here. Can it live up to fan's expectations?

No. No it can't. But frankly, what could have? There's no following up saving the world and fighting the physical embodiment of universal despair. Instead, Dawntrail bravely walks its own path of fresh beginnings and new adventures. There's the occasional stumble along the way through the new continents of Tural, but it (mostly) sticks the landing.

The first thing you'll notice in Dawntrail, before you've even made it onto the boat to Tural, is just how good everything looks. This expansion brings a major graphical update to the game that has vastly improved character looks, materials and lighting. It's such a big leap forward that I spent my first hour of playtime just marvelling at the tiniest of

details, like the fact my character now has slight dark circles around her eyes that adds actual depth to her face. The bottle and cupboards in my house have defined texture to them, and the foliage feels so full now. Everyone has had a glow up.

After inviting you to join her squad during the last patch of Endwalker, cat in charge Wuk Lamat very much directs the story of Dawntrail. She's the reason you're travelling to Tural – you're only there to help her win the right of succession

and claim the Dawnservant's throne over her siblings. It's a real family story of living up to expectations and straddling that line between love and rivalry. Wuk Lamat and her brother Koana, an incredibly smart Miqo'te, are both the adopted children of the

This expansion brings a major graphical update to the game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The fifth expansion for Square's MMO, and the first following the end of the Hydaelyn and Zodiark saga

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16GB RAM, Intel HD
Graphics 630

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
finalfantasyxiv.com

current Dawnservant – a giant, two-headed lizard-like Mamool Ja called Gulool Ja Ja. He also has a trueborn son, Zoraal Ja, who will stop at nothing to win the contest for the throne. And they are all joined by a fourth contender – Bakool Ja Ja – another sacred two-headed Mamool Ja.

WARRIOR OF LIGHT

Things start pretty slowly as you explore the forests and wetlands of Kozama'uka, and the mountains of Urqopacha, and learn about the peoples who live there. There's no real major threat to contend with, just sibling rivalry and the inevitability of comparing yourself to your family. As the Warrior of Light you're pretty much there in a mentor role to guide Wuk Lamat as she comes up against her own inadequacies and finds her own strengths. She's a very earnest and relatable character who clearly isn't ready for leadership until she starts finding her footing. Unlike her rivals who she's not as smart or strong as, she takes the time to get distracted and learn about all of the cultures and delicacies she comes across.

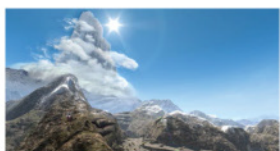


ABOVE: The Pictomancer job isn't tied to a class, and begins with a quest at level 80.





TOP: The cowboy area certainly makes for a change of pace.



ABOVE: The first main city is glorious – it feels particularly vibrant and thriving.

She's endearing as you watch her overcome her own insecurities and grow up in such a short amount of time, but she's also prone to a few too many speeches about learning about people and working together. It's sweet the first and second time, but it starts to grate by the fifth – like our hand is being held a little too tightly. Yes, we get it, working together to overcome our differences is great.

RITE OF SUCCESSION

Eventually the rite of succession comes to a conclusion and things take a turn for the weird with a surprise Wild West chapter. On the surface, now that things are dealt with, you're just off on a little jaunt with your old



The landscape of Tural is a stunning place.

BEFORE AND AFTER *Comparing the graphical update*

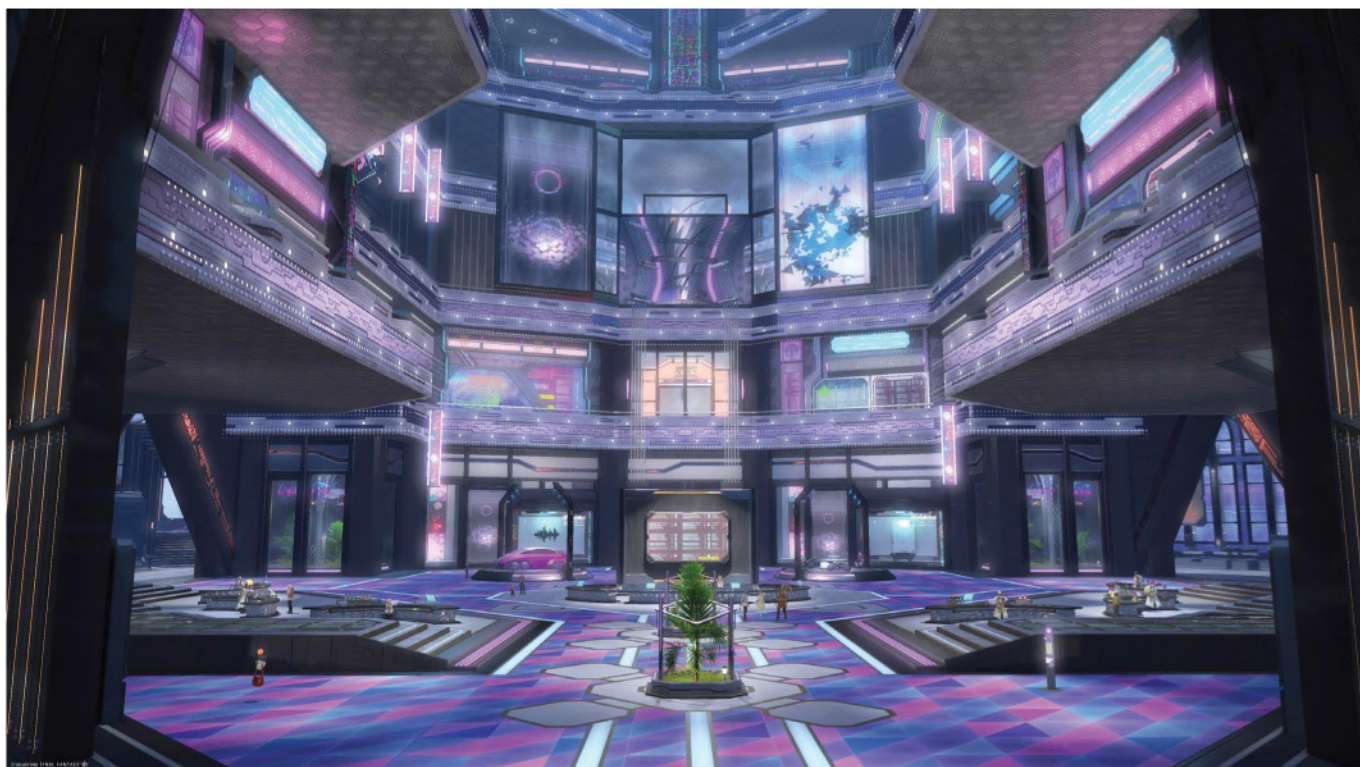
BEFORE

The lighting and facial features feel flat. There's no real shadow to the nose. Textures feel blurred and ragged.



AFTER

New lighting adds depth to facial features and lips and eyes have more texture. Clothes look more defined.



friend Erenville to visit his hometown, but instead find yourself in an odd pocket of cowboys, gunfights and saloons. It's the one major dip in rite of succession. The landscape of Shaaloani is great – it's dusty and full of weirdly-shaped cactuar waiting to attack you – but it's also full of familiar tropes and unconvincing performances. The tone shift feels so out of place and one Scion appearance felt so bewildering I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it.

However the slow pace and relative boredom of the events here did have one thing going for it – it made the story's final section hit like a truck. A real threat finally shows itself – one that can't be fixed by talking it out and overcoming differences. To say any more would ruin the surprise as the final zones are where things really come together. The last zone in particular is worth going in completely blind, and is genuinely one of the best areas I've seen in the entire game. It also sets up some really exciting possibilities for *FFXIV*'s future.

TOP: The cyber city might not look like it would fit into *FFXIV*'s universe, but it makes surprising sense.

FAR LEFT: Wuk Lamat is the real star of *Dawntrail* as the Scions get demoted to more minor showings.

STORY BEATS

Getting to the heart of Dawntrail



FAMILY TIES

Ultimately the game is about exploring family ties – be that the way siblings compare themselves, trying to connect to one's parents, or the conflict of still having love for someone who has done something unforgivable. It also explores



different approaches to finding birth parents, dealing with grief, and creating your own found families with friends. It may not do it perfectly, but there are many profound, touching moments that will resonate no matter what your family looks like.

Despite the odd story hiccups, exploring Tural is wonderful. Each town you come across feels so distinct with its own history and customs, from the feathery Hanuhanu's reliance on reeds and ceremony, to the giant Yok Huy's beliefs of life after death. You explore each in a surprising amount of detail that helps ground this vast fantasy world so that it feels tangible and real. The forests of Yak'Tel are a particular highlight as you navigate the bubbling tensions between those living in the bright, upper forest, and those living in almost complete darkness in the lower half. The descent from sunshine and swaying leaves to gnarled roots and the soft blue glow of luminescent plants is as dramatic as they come.

The whole adventure feels reminiscent of *Final Fantasy X*. It's one long tour as you support Wuk Lamat on her journey, much like Tidus does for Yuna, but without the doomed, secret smooches in the glowy woods. Fans of *Final Fantasy IX* also get treated to a feast of Easter eggs and musical touches in the final quarter.

Unfortunately, *Endwalker's* abominable stealth sections make a return (one comes right after another, ough), but thankfully with a facelift that makes them easier to follow. There are also a few missed opportunities – a lot of the story quests are just going somewhere to talk to someone who then sends you straight back. There are a few excellent solo duties, but they feel few and far between. Some new quest types would go a long way to break things up. Luckily, the fighting is the best it's ever been.

As a healer the new dungeons have had me sweating. Each boss has had new mechanics that really mix

things up by layering them in unexpected ways. Now on top of having to dodge telegraphed attacks you'll also find yourself weaving around obstacles and needing to watch arena edges and projectile paths

closely. Despite so many new mechanics to play with, it's still immediately readable – you just need to work harder to not get hit. In particular the two post-game dungeons layer imaginative designs with cheeky references and mechanics that make your adrenaline surge. They've set a new bar for exciting combat.

TWO NEW JOBS

The two new jobs, Pictomancer and Viper, fit into the roster well with Viper carving its own super speedy

niche and Pictomancer making for a great alternative to Black Mage. Viper is easy to get to grips with at a surface level so you'll safely be making dents in enemies from the outset, but takes more skill to master. Pictomancer, on the other hand, seems complicated at first as you build up for larger attacks, but soon clicks into place. While most of the other jobs make the leap to the new level cap seamlessly, Black Mage players are struggling with the greater emphasis on movement during dungeons when trying to perform some spells.

Elsewhere crafters and gatherers have plenty to tuck into with all the new materials and recipes. There are no major changes to how things work, but there didn't need to be. The deliveries quests are great for rounding out the culture of Tulliyolal and are worth it for more lore tidbits.

Like the family ties the game explores, *Dawntrail* feels messy. But while there are disappointments and low points, it's also full of heart. It's at its best in the small moments of joy and discovery you share with those around you. Wuk Lamat's journey might not be to everyone's tastes, but the game's world and combat come together to make up for the dips in the story to round things out into one hell of a package. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail's rich world and amazing dungeon design more than make up for dips in the story.

80



RIGHT: This your annual reminder to get changed into your most glamorous outfit *BEFORE* you enter a cutscene.



A LITTLE SILHOUETTO

SCHIM is a 3D platformer with an identity crisis

By Jody Macgregor

Back in 2007 or so there was a real trend for indie puzzle-platformers, usually about a sad boy who had to go from the left of the screen to the right for some reason. Though it's not a 2D platformer, *Schim* reminds me of that era, when indie games would be about taking a single mechanic then expressing it through a different iteration in each level while squeezing as much emotional heft as possible out of storytelling on a budget.

In *Schim* you play a shadow creature that can't exist in the light, hopping from one puddle of darkness to the next like you're playing goth Frogger. With your eyeballs poking up out of the shadows you swim around in, there's a definite frogginess to the main character. Occasionally you see other shadow frogs hopping around in other shadows, gigantic ones lurking in the darkness beneath trucks and the like. You're a more ordinary shadow frog though, one who lives in the shadow cast by a single person – until you're separated, beginning a quest across the city to find your way back to the sad boy whose silhouette you call home.

Sometimes it's a matter of timing. You wait for a car, a cyclist, or a box on a conveyor to pass so you can jump into its shadow. You can also interact with objects and beings whose shadow you're in, pressing buttons to open doors, change traffic lights, or raise a forklift's arms to lengthen its shadow so you can rush to the edge and leap before it lowers. This is *Schim* at its best, when you're making a duck quack at a cat or turning on streetlamps to make new havens you can navigate.

The city – and a slice of countryside – you cross is explicitly Dutch, as are the creators of *Schim*. Some of the maps could be almost any videogame city with cars driving on the right, but occasionally you'll see a parked bicycle dangling over the side of a bridge it's chained to, or an unusually clean park, and realise

you're in continental Europe. I wish there was more of this local colour, especially when you leave it behind for a generic factory level or the like.

At the start of each chapter you're treated to a lengthy pan over the map, zig-zagging across the course you'll be following. You don't need to plan your path in advance, however, as it's almost always super clear where you need to go. Painfully so, in

fact. Where you might expect the interactions to build into brain-

You play a shadow creature that can't exist in the light

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An isometric puzzle-platformer where well-lit floors are lava

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Ewoud van der Werf, Nils Slijkerman

PUBLISHER
Extra Nice, PLAYISM

REVIEWED ON
Windows 11, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
schimgame.com

bending puzzles or challenging feats of jumping, they never do.

RELAXATION

Schim remains easy enough to suggest it's designed for relaxation rather than intensity, and yet those long pans across the level don't make me feel chilled-out at all. They make me feel exhausted, each one showing where the sad boy you're following has gone next, a position you know he'll have moved on from by the time you get there. Every level ends in a tedious 'princess in another castle' tease for the next one.

I was dealt a real blow by that feeling when I went back to *Schim* after taking a break to find it had lost an entire level of my progress. Replaying the map and trying different things revealed that, beyond a few collectables hidden down dead ends you wouldn't bother with if you aren't an achievement hunter, there's nothing to *Schim* beneath the surface. The closest thing it has to difficulty comes when you need to quickly spin the camera around because you've passed behind an object into a moving shadow that won't be there for long, and the closest thing to relaxation is when you find a vehicle heading in the right direction and get to take your hands off the controls for a minute as it takes you where you need to go.

Condensed down to its best moments *Schim* would have been an impressive student game, but stretched out to the length demanded by full-price indie label games it becomes a chore. The puzzle-platformers of the class of 2007 cast a long shadow, and *Schim* doesn't do enough to escape from under them. ■

FROGTOWN

Games where you play an actual frog



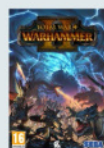
THE HAUNTED ISLAND, A FROG DETECTIVE GAME

This is less about solving a crime, more about making friends with a variety of oddball animal people. Kind of fun though.



FROG FRACTIONS

An educational game about learning to type and eating bugs. You eat bugs by playing a *Missile Command* minigame, only instead of missiles it's insects.



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

The slann, who lead Warhammer's lizardmen armies, are frog people, so this definitely counts. They're frog people from beyond the stars.



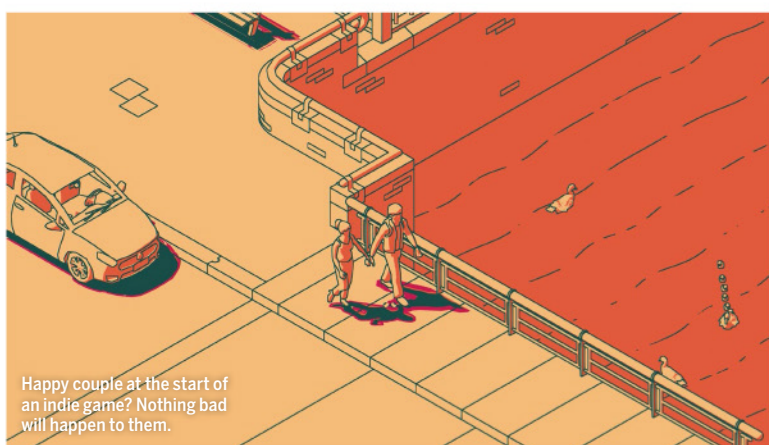
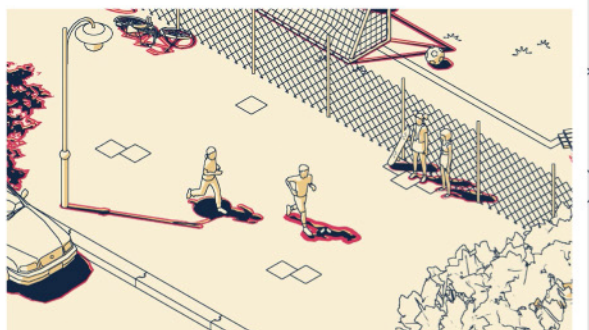
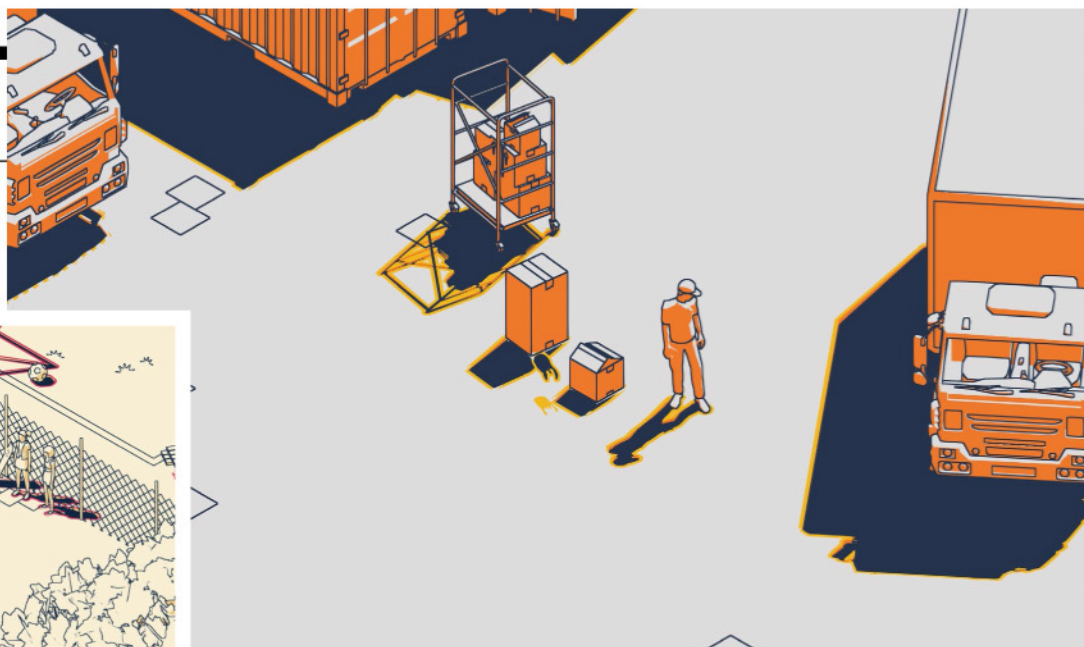
FROGGER

First, Frogger teaches you modern civilisation is at odds with nature. Then it teaches you that nature is pretty rough too, what with all the crocodiles.

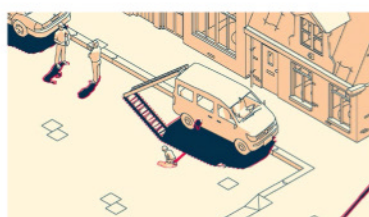
PC GAMER VERDICT

Unfortunately *Schim* is not difficult enough to be a challenge, but not painless enough to be relaxing.

57

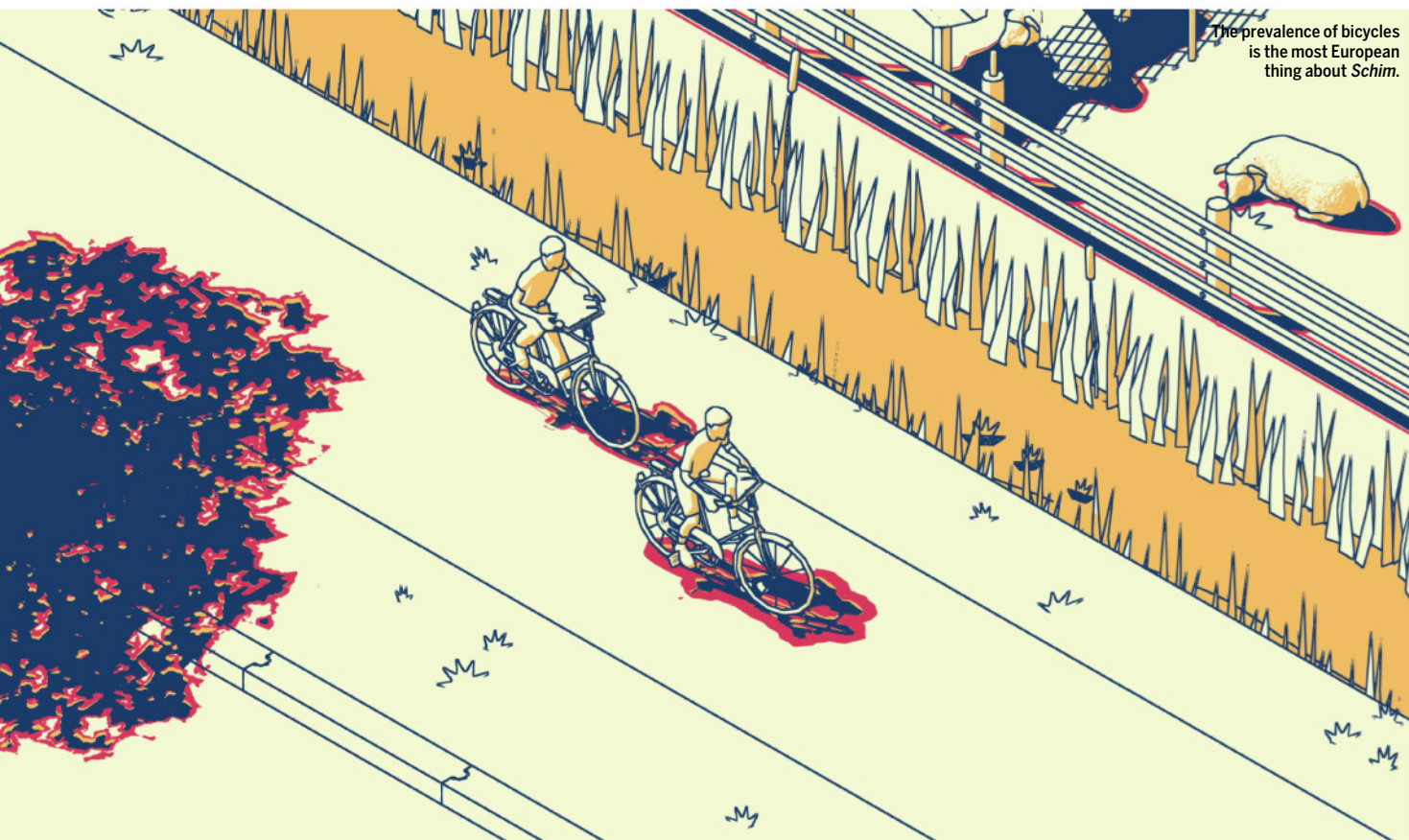
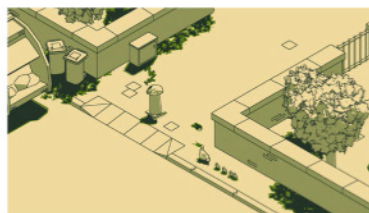


Happy couple at the start of an indie game? Nothing bad will happen to them.



ABOVE: A convenient row of shadows.

LEFT: Bless the person who leans their ladder against a van.



The prevalence of bicycles is the most European thing about Schim.

SUPER HUMAN

Build, farm, shoot, cooperate in **ONCE HUMAN**'s deep, addictive MMO

By Heather Newman

To be honest, I didn't expect to get into a NetEase survival MMO that's coming to phones as well as PC, shrugging it off at first as another mobile-first game that would keep me engaged for about as long as it took for my fast food order to arrive. I could not have been more wrong.

Once Human is far from perfect, but it is good. For a free-to-play game, it is stunningly good. Does it break new ground? Not one bit. It's like a less cartoony, more fully-fleshed out version of creature collector Palworld, in that it throws everything people like from other games into one giant bucket. Am I here for that? Absolutely.

Once you're done with the detailed character creation, you'll jump into the game as a meta-human, a new mutation of homo sapiens that have adapted to alien stardust which has turned most of the planet into monsters. The people who remain are either plucky

rebels and pioneers, or evil guards working for the folks that unleashed this plague to begin with.

Blasting through an entire room of stardust monsters is satisfying, but not difficult – at least for the first season, more on that later. Right now, it's the item collecting and crafting that make *Once Human* engrossing for long stretches.

Blasting through a room of stardust monsters is satisfying

CRAFTING LAYERS

Almost immediately you'll begin crafting, using basic resources that are lying around in huge quantities. I had a house up and running in no time, which was incredibly easy to do,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A free to play open-world MMO survival/action/RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
Free to play, with cosmetic items for purchase

DEVELOPER
Starry Studio/Netease

PUBLISHER
Starry Studio/Netease

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10 Pro, Intel i9-10920X, 128 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 3080

STEAM DECK
No

LINK
oncehuman.game

minus the proper adjustment of roof pieces, which were so finicky I impatiently went with a Sydney Opera House-on-acid approach and just got the danged thing covered with something to keep out the rain.

Like every system in *Once Human*, building is deep and complex, and players are already showing off incredible, sprawling multi-story estates online. You can see and visit others' houses in the game and use their machines. My friends leave notes for me on the whiteboard I put in my house. That's part of the fun of crafting: many of the objects are interactive, not just things you craft for the sake of crafting them. That whiteboard is one. There's also a mirror that lets you remake your character, a piano you can play for your friends in game, and a mailbox that actually gets mail. It's a great mix of cosmetic items to spruce up your place and hardcore upgrades for your gear, your weapons, or your home defences or production facilities. Some come to you in funny ways – my Logging Beaver just brought me a dining chair, for example.

Every single system is layered deeper than you expect. Food you carve from beasts or harvest from fields expires quickly in *Once Human*, so you'll want a stove, and probably a fridge and a meat dryer. All of those require multiple layers of crafting to produce – harvest trees to make charcoal and smelt the ores and glass, disassemble the pre-apocalypse junk you collect for plastics and adhesives and the like, and craft the things. In the case of more advanced items, you'll need to set up a power system as well, with a generator and so on.

But wait, just having meat for the meat dryer isn't enough: you need salt, too, and to get that you're going to have to visit the sea, harvest sea water, and use the stove to turn it into salt. And then if you eat dried meat, you're going to get thirsty faster, because of the salt content... it goes on and on.

FUN WITH FRIENDS

Three ways to use co-op to go fast

1 SHARE MACHINES

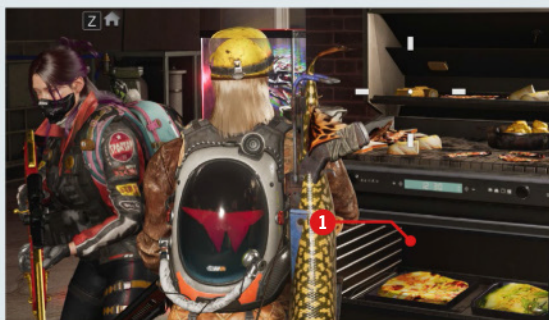
Build houses next door, and set your machines to be usable by friends. You'll only need to build one of each.

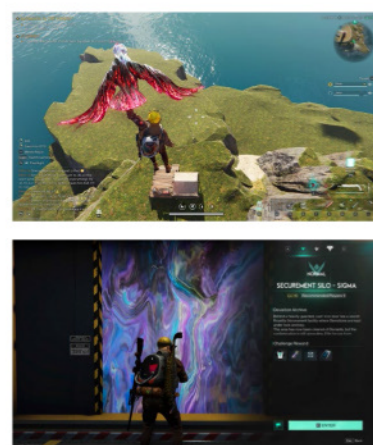
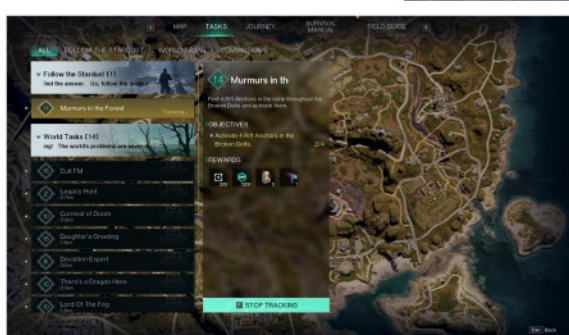
2 CARPOOL

Build a multiplayer vehicle, one of the most fun ways to traverse the game world.

3 SPLIT YOUR TREES

You can craft items for your friends and drop them, so you don't have to both take all the crafting trees.

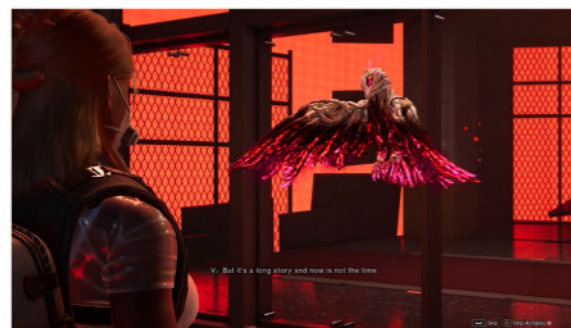
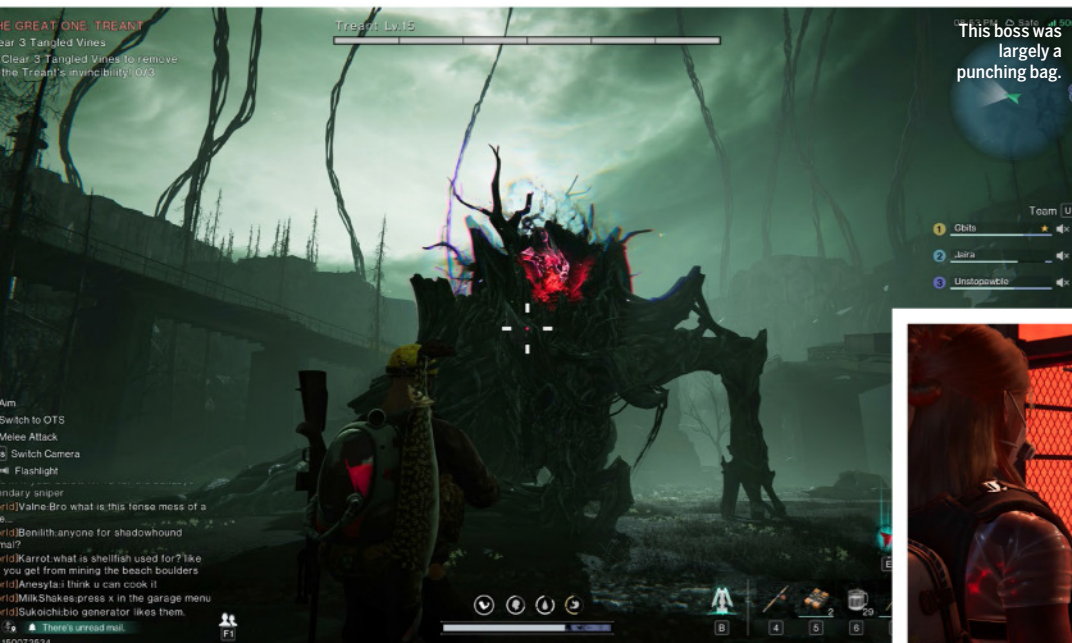




FAR LEFT: On day one, this is what one player's house already looked like.

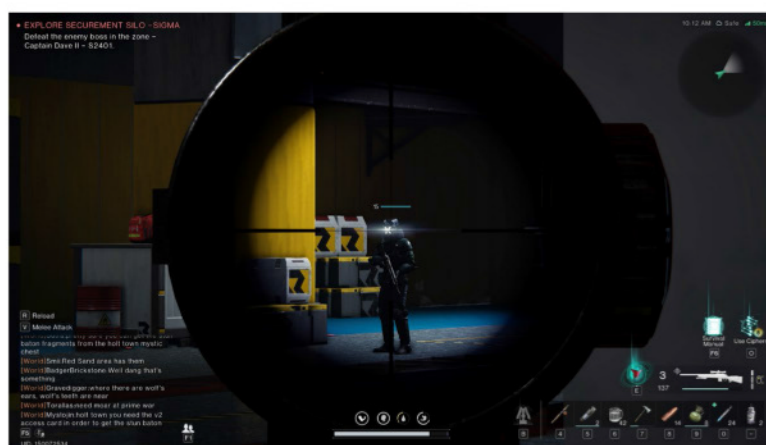
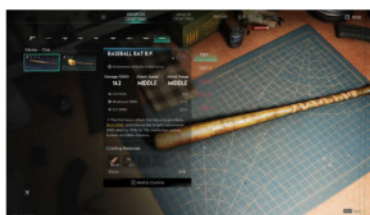
LEFT: One of the game's NPCs helps you glide where you need to go - in this case, over one of the pop-up player campgrounds.





RIGHT: This piano, which I crafted, is playable – and your friends can hear your composition.

FAR RIGHT: This guard is about to become a one-shot.



This creature has a treasure chest inside. You kill its legs and the chest adds it spawns to hop in.

◆ JOURNEY

- ◆ Use the Camera to take a picture of a Deer, Wolf, or Crocodile



Resources aren't a blocker here. For the most part, they're either lying around for you to harvest or pick up or fish or farm for, or made from something else you can collect with ease. The enjoyment comes from picking your priorities – what should I make next? – and seeing your plans come to fruition: sitting

on that overstuffed chair you made, watching your auto-turret demolish an energy-hungry zombie in a ravaged business suit or energy-ball-shooting flying octopi, or killing an elite umbrella-headed monster in a dress with two bursts from your fully modded SMG.

This unexpected depth extends to *Once Human's* creature collecting. The Deviant creatures you collect and store in terrariums in your house can help you out – by collecting resources for you, or fighting alongside you, or helping you sleep better – but they also require their own things to perform at their best: lights of a particular colour, or power, or music from a radio, or plants or flowers, or heat from a furnace. I love the gatherers, including the Logging Beaver, the Fetch a Lot Bunny, and the Digby Boy, who are adorable and automatically wander out from my house to collect resources.

Because resources are abundant at lower levels, nothing is too difficult to acquire or build. But it's one more minigame that keeps you engaged, and I can't count the number of times so far I've looked up from a "short" session to discover that another five hours had disappeared.

READY, AIM, ONE-SHOT

When it comes time to shoot, *Once Human* is dead easy: with fully upgraded gear and weapons, everything in the open world can be offed with a single headshot, and bosses are mostly sponges. Enemy AI is fairly stupid and slow, especially far away, and part of why this survival

game isn't scary is because nothing can truly hurt you if you don't let it get to you or are prepared to melee. 'Alert' sounds or dialog make jump scares, well, scarce. The only death I've had so far in the game was due to a bug,

when I fell through the world after ducking into a densely packed corner to escape a sniper's line of sight.

There's a Sanity mechanic, which I'm sure will be an issue someday, but it hasn't played a role for me so far.

For an MMO, there are very few encounters that truly require playing with or against other people, though you'll see them everywhere, and their houses, and their pop-up campgrounds of tents that allow you to set a respawn point. Many dungeons can be done solo.

Despite the low difficulty, I'm having a stupidly good time blowing things up. Successfully sniping four enemies in as many seconds imparts a powerful feeling – I'm fine with inhabiting a fantasy world where I'm extremely badass and regular monsters are just bubble wrap bubbles to pop. There's a season wipe coming at the start of September, and I'm not going to be done with everything there is to do by then, so blazing through content is not a problem yet. All the servers available

are 'Novice' servers, so I expect the difficulty to ramp up in the future.

DRIVING ME CRAZY

There are drawbacks to the 'bucket of everything' approach. For starters, whoever designed its menu systems obviously struggled with where to put all of that 'everything'. Character tasks and progression are separated into five different trees, which are buried frustratingly deeply in menus.

The quality of *Once Human's* many features is also uneven. Riding in vehicles can be great fun, for instance. One of my teammates jumped ahead in the crafting tree just to make us an SUV, which we could all ride in, swapping seats, listening to the radio, and leaning out to shoot enemies. The Mean Girls-style 'get in loser, we're going monster hunting' vibe when he first rolled up made me truly laugh aloud.

Driving vehicles, however, is not so fun. By default it's WASD with no mouse control, which is just as clunky as it sounds. It also has collision (and repairing and fuel, because of course it does), but exactly what it'll hit and mow over (monsters, causing damage) and what'll stop it dead (tiny pebbles, some-but-not-all bushes, a four-inch kerb) is unpredictable.

I don't have complaints about the monetisation, though, which isn't often the case in a free to play game: *Once Human* includes \$10 and \$24 Battle Passes, but they're just for cosmetics. This is truly free to play.

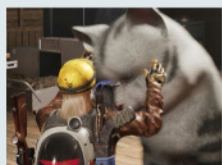
You do have to accept two hard-to-kill PC processes that run in the background as part of the game's security layer, and it insists on running in Admin mode, which it does not really have an excuse to do. You have to run voice comms programs like Discord in Admin mode to use push-to-talk every single time you play as a result, which is irritating.

But in the grand scheme of things, those are minor annoyances for a game this deep, this engaging, and this free. Sometimes games don't need to reinvent a genre to become a favourite spare-time romp. ■



FOUR GREAT DEVIANTS

Capture these early and reap the rewards



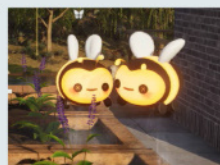
EXTRADIMENSIONAL CAT

This cute kitty meows, wanders around your house and helps you to recover super quickly while sleeping.



THE DIGBY BOY

Found by mining, this Deviant will automatically mine around your property and collect more ore than you can use.



BUZZY BEE

Buzzy tends crops for you. He's found in the maze of vines next to Sutherland Family Orchards (not in a chest, as he was in beta).



LOGGING BEAVER

The Beaver mows down trees around your home, which is great, because this game uses a lot of wood. Found at the docks at Meyer's Market.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A deep, surprisingly sticky, truly free-to-play mashup of what you like from a bunch of other survival MMOs.

84

RIVEN-TING

This **RIVEN** remake brings a new dimension to an old classic

By Kerry Brunskill

Atrus. Linking books. Ages. Weird, weird, puzzles. *Riven*, like its prequel *Myst*, is one of those old games that feels a little familiar – a little revered, even – to just about everyone of a (my) certain age. Going back to the original in the cold light of 2024 is hard: it's a 640x480 flipbook of a game, much of its original multi-disk awe and wonder lost to time. This remake brings all of the ancient magic back in an instant.

At the risk of stating the obvious: this is *Riven*, but in 3D. And I don't just mean the old environments, polished domes, and worn machinery are all still there. This is the most successful, spiritually accurate real-time recreation of that unmistakable pre-rendered '90s CG style I've ever seen. The outdoor sun is always just a bit too bright, and interior lights have an attractive yet artificial pre-baked quality to their illumination. Foliage is too detailed yet naively simplistic all at once, giant single blades of green erupting from the dirt.

It's beautiful. Stylish. Timeless. Being able to casually walk around environments that once took professional workstations hours to render from a single angle at much lower detail almost feels disrespectful to history, yet it immediately makes for a better adventure.

Somehow *Riven* still manages to look amazing even on relatively lowly modern hardware. Due to the unexpected and catastrophic failure of my usual machine I had to play this on a laptop that I would at best describe as potato-like, yet somehow its GTX 1070 still managed to hit 60fps at 1080p at the game's maximum settings, with only a few rare, minor dips along the way.

It took a while before I was relaxed enough to appreciate it all though, as *Riven*'s introduction is a narratively dense and confusing experience, a bewildering flurry of scenes that brilliantly sets the tone for everything that follows. I'm completely out of my depth by design

– as counterintuitive as it may sound this actually helps to make the game more approachable, in a very *Riven* sort of way. Not knowing what's going on, or even having a good idea of where I am, is this game's idea of normal.

D'NI WORRY

The *Riven* remake preserves that unique sense of estrangement even though I've been to this world before. Not only have more

than a few puzzles have been altered, making it impossible to blunder through the entire game with an old FAQ open in a tab, this remake also

Looks amazing even on relatively lowly modern hardware

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A classic puzzle adventure, expertly updated

EXPECT TO PAY

£29.50

DEVELOPER

Cyan Worlds Inc

PUBLISHER

Cyan Worlds Inc

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700HQ, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

cyan.com/games/riven

makes absolutely no concessions to modern tastes. I'm expected to do this all by myself, without any sort of helpful hint system to nudge me along or even the option to highlight interactive objects.

What a view it is. There are vast expanses of water that seem determined to out-blue the skies above, golden domes and strange non-spaces where the usual laws of physics no longer apply.

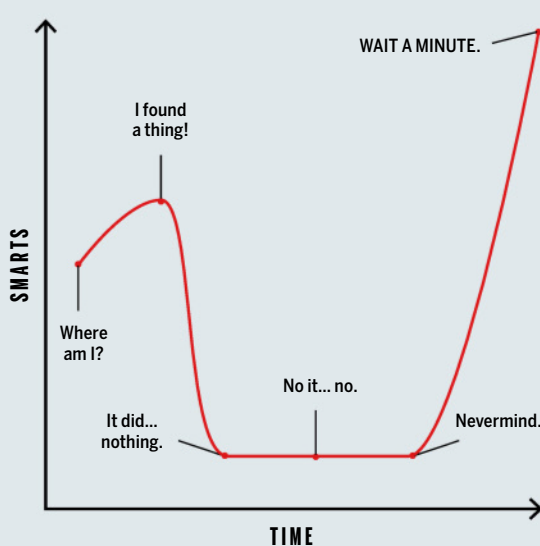
Because I'd been forced to adjust to the game's unhurried pace, because I'd been made to look around and really notice the world around me, I soon realised that hints and help are everywhere. There is a reason for every coloured glow, every piece of parchment covered in an inky scrawl – I can even learn something by playing with children's toys. It's all important, eventually.

Which is how I ended up with two pages worth of scribbles on fictional counting systems and notes that read "FROG=2?????" and "FISH THING IS?????" It looked more like I was channelling the spirit of da Vinci than solving a puzzle in a game, the reward for solving that not bland raw progress but personal satisfaction. Thank goodness *Riven*'s freeform notebook function allowed me to take screenshots as I went and write up my own notes along the way.

Riven's as captivating in 2024 as it's ever been. It's an inventive puzzle game that demands an intense yet unhurried sort of commitment, and then rewards those who give it. It's a vibrant alien world layered with lore and secrets. It has plenty of new twists on old solutions that will surprise its fans but still appear integrated to everyone else. This is how you remake a classic. ■

PUZZLING IT OUT

I am so smart! S-M-R-T!

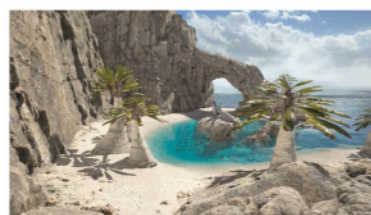
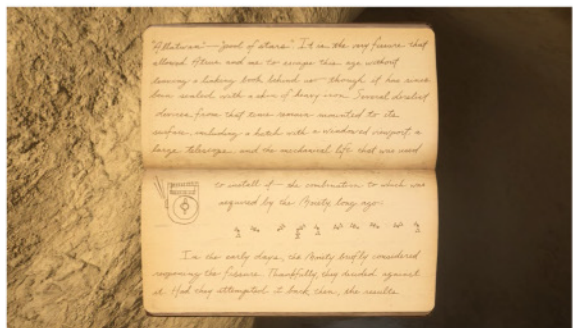


PC GAMER VERDICT

Cyan Worlds Inc's remake of *Riven* is as impressive, immersive, and unmissable as it's ever been.

90

Familiar landmarks
in the distance help
keep me grounded.



FAR LEFT: Gorgeous scenery is as common as tricky puzzles.

LEFT: Remade foliage retains a convincingly '90s sheen.



3D models replace the old bluescreen FMV actors.

DEMON DISCO

KUNITSU-GAMI's unique action/strategy combo guarantees you'll be dancing 'til dawn

By Kerry Brunskill

My archers are in place, holy priestess Yoshiro is safely surrounded by woodcutters and with a bit of luck the local carpenter will finish repairing the magical barrier nearby before sunset. An unsettling drumbeat intensifies as the shadows lengthen across dilapidated buildings and demonic growths. The sun finally sets below the horizon. This is it. I've done everything I can: now I just need to make sure everyone survives until dawn.

Steeped in traditional Japanese stylings, Capcom's twist on tower defence combines unholy abominations, purifying ritual dances and bloody survival to mesmeric effect. I am expected to play the part of an action hero, strategic mastermind and divine protector all at once. Every stage is a graceful ballet stretching from gentle dawn to deadly night and back again, a land of contrasts where lumbering monsters are defeated by elegant movements, and planned defences might need to be abandoned in favour of spontaneous attacks.

Kunitsu-Gami's levels run on a short day/night cycle, the light hours spent searching for people to rescue,

bolstering my defences, and repairing key local structures, the night passed fighting back the hordes of monsters making a beeline for Yoshiro. Much of my success depends on my daylight strategising. Is it better to

spend the crystals I've gathered cutting a path for Yoshiro, allowing her to get closer to the end of the stage, or should I spend them to equip villagers with combat roles that suit our latest hold-out point? Have I

positioned them in the right places, blocking off all the routes to the priestess and setting us up to snipe incoming enemies from afar? Is it worth running off on a life-restoring ration hunt, or should I turn a unit into a healer instead?

Much of my success depends on my daylight strategising

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A brilliant mix of deadly demons, divine dancing, and deft defence

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Capcom

PUBLISHER

Capcom

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700HQ, GTX 1070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

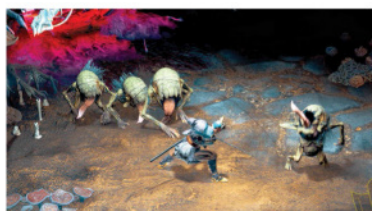
LINK

kunitsu-gami.com

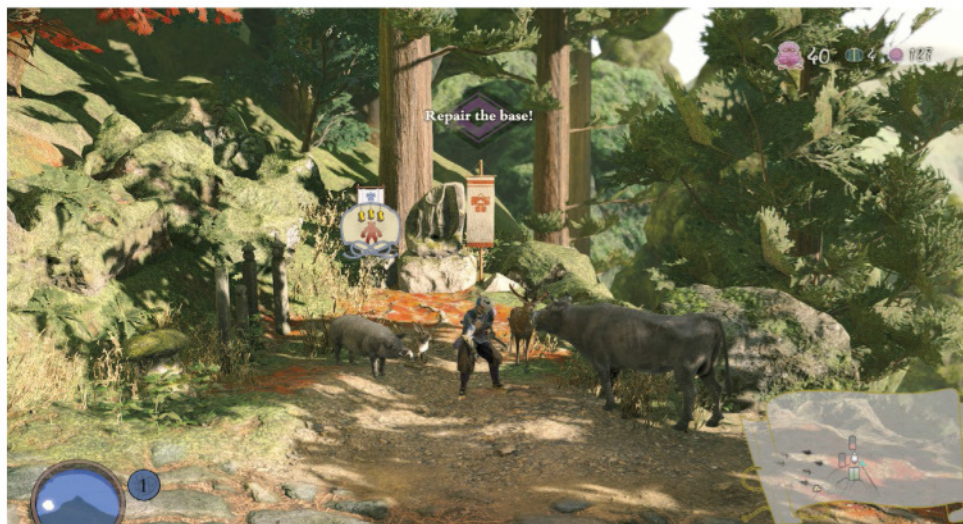
NIGHT TERRORS

These decisions are a matter of life and death. I've had overlooked monster-spewing gates wipe out the archers I'd placed close by with close-range assaults they were never supposed to handle, then turned scrappy battles into smooth victories with the right units standing in the right places on second attempts. Knowing my villagers definitely have a particular direction covered means there's one less thing to worry about, one less thing that can kill Yoshiro. The only thing better than beating a level is beating a level on my second or third go, watching the slobbering forces of evil clash with my perfectly primed defences – and crumble.

The only character I have any direct control over is Soh, Yoshiro's spiritual protector. Far more than just a cursor to waft across the battlefield, Soh makes me the most powerful fighter in any stage, and if I use their balletic sword swipes, graceful dodges and magical skills well, I can hurriedly plug any unforeseen gaps in my defences. During combat I'll often have to rush to focus on the unexpected arrival of more powerful creatures before they tear everyone

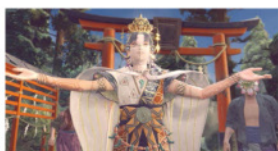


TOP: Purifying an area brings up a rather Okami-like scene.





TOP: Larger bosses can easily tear through an unprepared team.



FAR RIGHT: The classic 'sickle weasel' has been given a grim twist.



else to pieces or begin chanting a spell that buffs all the smaller demons nearby. How I fight is always at least as important as how I think.

QUICK STEP

Soh's broad range of moves are all easily executed; intelligently choosing what to do and when is more important than mimicking Devil May Cry-style combos. How quickly I react to an attack coming Soh's way can make all the difference in battle. A perfectly timed dodge means I've saved a life-restoring ration for a frontline fighter who really needs the help, and unleashing a gauge-depleting special skill can see a powerful monster stunned before it has the chance to buff the faceless swarm of lesser demons nearby. How well I time their attacks and how quickly I react to any coming Soh's way can make all the difference in battle, and every swing has force and grace behind it. But it's just one thread in a much larger tapestry, and best to think of the action as strategy delivered by swordpoint, rather than the focus of the game. And if it's all going wrong while I'm in there swinging my sword, that's nothing a bit of slightly panicked mid-battle adjusting can't fix anyway.

A sudden influx of flying enemies can be countered by reassigning melee fighters to ranged attacker roles (assuming I have enough crystals to pay for a pricey

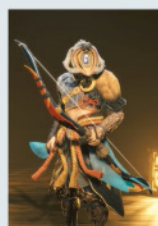


DANCER DEFENCE

Key villager roles that'll help you



WOODCUTTER
Cheap and reliable, the woodcutter is a versatile melee attacker.



ARCHER
Able to hit flying monsters. High positions allow them to shoot further.



ASCETIC
This villager can slow down incoming monsters, making them easier to hit.



⌘ impromptu role swap, that is). An overlooked path flooded with enemies can be covered by shuffling my existing units around, something easily achieved thanks to an intuitive command system that gives me quick access to everyone on the field. Once they've run off to my chosen location, I can trust that they'll behave intelligently and reliably whenever an enemy or ally is within their clearly indicated active range.

TOP: Yoshiro can only dance if Soh carves her a path.

FAR LEFT: *Kunitsu-Gami's* demonic bosses are always grotesquely inventive.

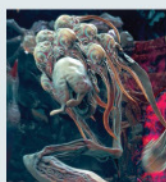
FLEXI-TIME

It's a good thing *Kunitsu-Gami's* so flexible, because no two stages play the same. Sometimes I've got a small group huddled together, ready to fend off an all-out assault in a worryingly open area; sometimes I've got enough troops and space to tactically spread everyone out. Maybe it'll be too dark to see anything unless I send people off to light the stone lanterns lining the winding way out, or I'll have to quickly decide which of two paths to send Yoshiro dancing down and adjust my strategy to match. Numerous boss battles switch things up again, the combination of devastating attacks with huge areas of effect and the ever-present threat of a sudden swarm encouraging a new sort of improvisation.

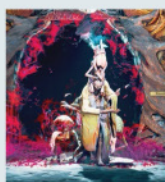
My clever tactical spacing suddenly means nothing if a boss has ordered a swarm of enemies to descend on Yoshiro – my team's all-out assault will have to wait until

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

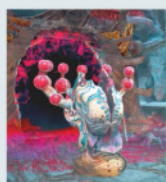
The best defence is hitting monsters really hard



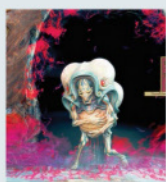
KAMAITACHI
This floating foe likes to slice with its sickle-shaped claws, and is best tackled by archers.



ROSOKURO
Their ghostly chants can empower nearby demons – it's best to make these a priority whenever they appear.



GOTAIMEN
A bombardment-type unit that loves to attack from afar. They're not great at dealing with melee-range attacks.



HOZUKIME
These monsters will unleash an explosion, and need to be rushed down before they injure an entire group of villagers.

they're dealt with. But leaving everyone grouped closely together around her can cause its own problems when bosses spit fire or damage the ground beneath their feet, and it's important to scatter my forces in those moments, drawing their attacks away from the one thing I need to protect. There is no one right way to fight, just a string of decisions that hopefully keep everyone alive.

Thankfully boss battles give me access to single-press 'everyone attack the monster' and 'everyone protect Yoshiro' commands on top of the quick and intuitive individual control I have of each unit, and however busy the game gets, I know I'll always have the time to properly consider my options as bringing up the command menu pauses the action. Thanks to these features I get the best of both worlds – I can sit and properly think out a new strategy whenever I need to, but if I do have an idea I can execute it so quickly there's barely a break in the action.

I'm often tempted to go back and play the same level again right after I finish it: the results screen taunts me with all of the reward-giving optional challenges I didn't manage to clear the first time around. Sometimes this could be as simple as making sure I use a specific number of different villager types, sometimes it's as tough as making sure Yoshiro, or maybe

even Soh, make it through the entire stage unscathed.

THE MORNING AFTER

It's not all about confronting the nightmarish forces of darkness though. Between stages I'm free to head back up the mountain to any village I've purified and have a walk around the newly freed area, upgrade my abilities, adjust my equipment, and instruct the villagers to conduct repairs, mending buildings, lanterns, broken shrines and so on while I'm away fighting. The rewards for this fantasy DIY range from the chance to view beautiful pieces of art to permanent upgrades that help make

everything I do just that little bit easier. The little slice of peace offers a relaxing change from the ongoing stress of protecting Yoshiro, and it made these little and largely silent NPCs feel worth fighting for.

I'm not just flexing my tactical prowess and clearing stages as I play, I'm saving lives and rebuilding homes – and getting to enjoy the hard work afterwards too. The contrast between that first glimpse of a place, twisted by darkness and teeming with evil, and then covered in colourful lanterns and filled with relaxed villagers, never got old.

It never looked ugly either, thanks to Capcom's now-standard suite of graphical options. Getting a neat visual thumbnail showing the exact difference between two types of

volumetric fog made it easy to tweak the game to my own preferences. KB+M controls are just as well thought out, the basics mapped to all the most sensible options (jump on spacebar, for one example), and all other commands within easy reach of my WASD-hovering fingers.

I fell in love with this game the instant the first diorama-styled stage came into view, and every moment afterwards only made me adore it more. I can put a cool little archer guy I just rescued on a plinth and enjoy watching them plink enemies out of the sky. I can plunge Soh sword-first into a bunch of demons and wipe them all out. I get to enjoy a group dance at the end of it, and then do it all again in another impossibly beautiful location.

At first I wanted to rush through the story because I knew I'd be rewarded with beautiful dances, exciting battles, hair-raising surprises, and the chance to pet all the cats, bunnies, pigs, and cute dogs milling around the freshly purified villages I saved along the way. Now I want to take my time and endlessly replay areas I've already cleared just to prove my strategic skills or take out a screen-sized boss in a new record time. However I want to play, I know *Kunitsu-Gami's* got a challenge – and a reward – waiting for me. ■



I can sit and properly think out a new strategy when I need to

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Kunitsu-Gami's a gorgeous and engaging take on tower defence. Fun, challenging and has great graphics.

86



TOP: The bonus artwork is a real treat



Some enemies grant smaller monsters dangerous buffs.



BELOW: Thankfully, most weapons auto-aim. You can even pick up melee hunter weapons.



BORNE AGAIN

NIGHTMARE KART is a fan-made Bloodborne karting game

The idea of giving *Bloodborne* its own karting spin-off is so ridiculous that, of course, it had to happen. But all the joke needed was a couple of mocked-up screenshots before we could all sit back and watch the social media engagement roll in. No one would devote any serious time to making *Bloodborne Kart* an actual thing, right? Er, yes – and who better to undertake it than the developer of *Bloodborne*'s PS1 demake.

Like *Bloodborne PSX*, *Nightmare Kart* is kind of a joke game. But what an exquisite and painstakingly delivered gag. The name may have clued you in that The Lawyers have pecked off the *Bloodborne* affiliation, but even with the serial numbers removed it's still clearly devoted to From Software's classic.

There's a hunt on in the gothic metropolis of Miralodia, only this time it's conducted with rad go-karts, and motorbikes, and angelic hamster wheels, and a boar I guess?

While the story largely follows its inspiration, the action takes the form of races and arena battles, as the hunters zip round tracks inspired by *Bloodborne*. Racing round the Hunter's Dream while an upbeat chiptune plays over the top is an act

of beautiful blasphemy that can only come from a place of deep love.

It's so incongruous a juxtaposition – one of the darkest games in one of the lightest genres – that it could feel flimsy and cheap, if developer Lilith

Walther hadn't worked so hard to tie the disparate halves together. The *Bloodborne* influence is more than skin-deep, with characters, karts and environments being drawn from the lore (albeit altered a bit

to keep The Lawyers from circling), while special stages accurately recreate some of *Bloodborne*'s best moments – this time on wheels. Chasing Nicholas (*Bloodborne*'s Micolash) round his maze-like corridors is a pitch-perfect moment, taken to absurd new heights in this.

One of the darkest games in one of the lightest genres

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Re-imagines From Software's classic *Bloodborne* as a PS1-era karting game

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
LW Media

PUBLISHER
LW Media

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/NightmareKart

KART ATTACK

Nightmare Kart is also just a damn good karting game. The karts feel varied and enjoyable to control, with a drift function that is easy to execute and that here grants potions that can be chugged to boost. The AI made me work for it, only occasionally getting snagged on the scenery.

The campaign mixes straight races and deathmatch battles with boss fights that have unique conditions, including that fight with Nicholas. There's no online multiplayer, but you can play split-screen with a fellow hunter, picking from every character, game mode and track.

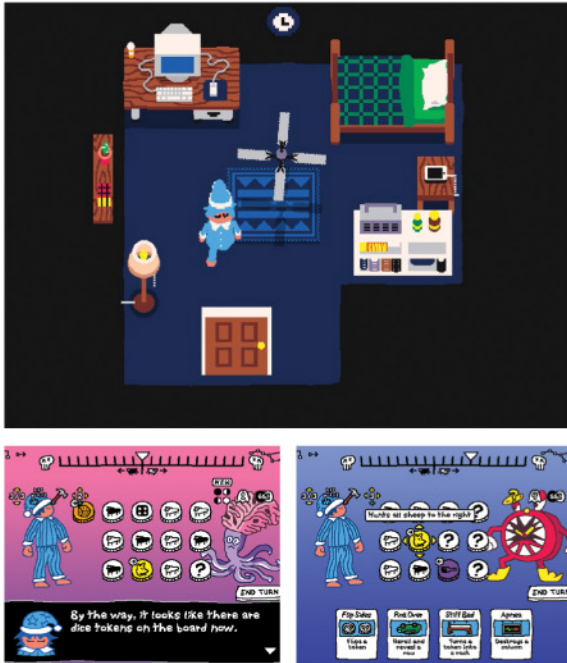
Walther has really gone to town making *Nightmare* (née *Bloodborne*) *Kart* not just a reality but a worthy entry in the karting genre. The only snag is that stages can be pretty dark, and slightly difficult to read thanks to the wobbly PS1-style textures. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An above-and-beyond realisation of a silly idea, and a fun karting game, if you're onboard with the PS1 aesthetic.

83

BELOW: You can plod around your room for tips on how to play.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Jon Topielski

LINK
bit.ly/PillowFightGame

NO SLEEP

To sleep, perchance to scheme in **PILLOW FIGHT**

The whole deckbuilding roguelike thing can be traced back to *Dream Quest*, and now it's come full circle with the unrelated but similarly nap-tastic *Pillow Fight*, which plays out as you're trying to get to sleep.

Knowledge of the genre will not necessarily help you here, however, as *Pillow Fight* makes big changes to the formula that was set down in pencil with *Dream Quest*, and in stone with *Slay the Spire*. Rather than your hand being dealt randomly every turn, you get a persistent set of cards that have cooldowns before they can be used again.

You're mainly playing with a set of white and black sheep tokens, which will earn you – or your opponent – points as each turn comes to an end, when the remaining tokens are weighed on a scale.

These tokens can be manipulated with the cards (or any latent abilities), letting you flip a black sheep to white, or reveal unknown tokens, for example. I spent a long time each turn looking at the board to decide where to use my cards, so that my white sheep weren't outnumbered in the final analysis.

Deckbuilding games are all about synergy, and that's true here as well, if on a smaller scale. After every battle you get a new card, which can then be used whenever you want. If you want to minimise the random element, focus on abilities and cards that will reveal hidden tokens.

There's so much potential in these systems, a word that's often a euphemism for 'game's too short'. But I'd be hard-pressed to describe half an hour of riveting tactical boardgaming that way. ■

82

HIGH TIDE

Normal fishing in a normal sea in **MOURNING TIDE**

If *Dredge* has left you terrified of the ocean, get your sea legs wet again with *Mourning Tide*, which offers a lovely bit of fishing, no monsters allowed. Hmm, that's a funny way of spelling 'morning'. And that's an alarming-looking fish. Oh no. Lovecraft has got his tentacles in this one too.

To be fair: no actual tentacles. Just several increasingly unsettling fish. But despite the descent into horror, the fishing in *Mourning Tide* remains a delight. Unusually, it doesn't follow the usual mechanics in fishing games, which have you hammering a button and pulling back an analogue stick to simulate the rod. Instead, after throwing the line into the ocean, you just have to move the mouse to keep it within a plain black circle.

Keep the struggling fishing inside the circle and, when the meter fills,

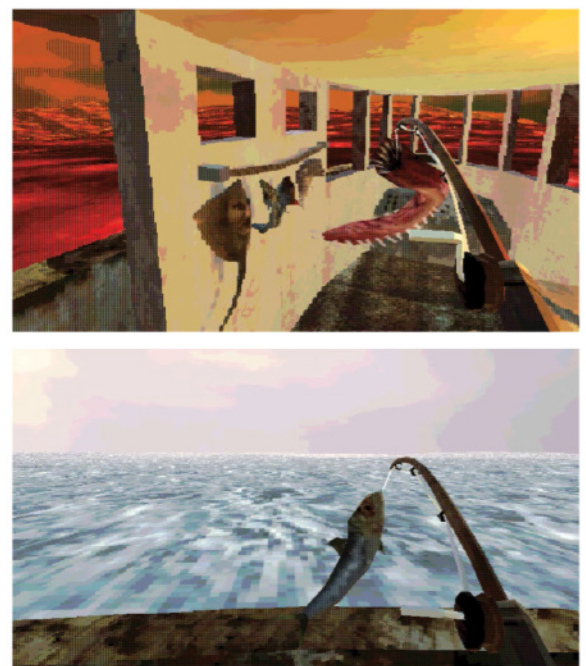
you will have caught your (dog's) dinner. It's a more relaxed method that fits strangely well with the game's ominous atmosphere.

Yeah, it all gets pretty fucked up – that final catch is a doozy. More unsettling for the way it develops gradually, before your eyes. I didn't notice when the sea became blood red or when the waves started pulsing threateningly, but the horror feels more real for the lack of jump scares or jump cuts – and so, oddly enough, do the cosy vibes, although admittedly they're diminished by the very end.

Here I am reviewing another game that's only ten minutes long, but some of the best horror is in short form, introducing something strange without having to fill the next several hours with elaboration that only dilutes the imagery. ■

73

BELOW: Not sure my local chippy would be interested in this one.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Karolína Kuberoá et al

LINK
bit.ly/MourningTide

This picture is far more ominous and terrifying than the actual encounter.



PICKAXE AND MIX

Going underground in the excellent **DEEP ROCK GALACTIC**

At the risk of sounding like I have terrible hand hygiene, I'm writing this with Citadel Trollslayer Orange on my thumbnail. This is relevant because I was highlighting Cthonian Beserks from Warhammer 40,000, which are as close as you can get to the dwarven heroes of *Deep Rock Galactic*. Every element of my life, apparently, needs to feature diminutive intergalactic miners.

Space dwarves are difficult to get right, which is partly why an entire range of Citadel miniatures, the Squats, were retconned and eventually replaced by the sleeker, more imaginative Leagues of Votann. With this thought in mind, I approach *Deep Rock Galactic* with some trepidation. But any anxiety is jettisoned when I accidentally press the taunt button in the first five seconds of the tutorial,

and my dwarf holds up a pickaxe and screams 'rock and stone' to an empty cavern. From here on, *Deep Rock Galactic* will have to work hard to make me do anything other than unconditionally love it. I'm even ignoring the mostly wretched voice acting.

UTTERLY SHAFTED

There are moments, however, where our relationship turns sour. I get hopelessly lost in one of my earliest missions, and somehow end up back in the same rocky basin about eight

times. It starts to resemble an overstuffed ashtray outside a Wetherspoons, lipstick-smearing dogends replaced by piles of expended flares. I get so desperate that I return

to the start and drill down to find fresh seams of ore, but I somehow end up in the same cave again. Then, worst of all, when I *do* finally hit my quota and call in the drop pod, the only route back that quick enough takes me directly up the vertical shaft I dug. A shaft I cannot climb.

I'm even ignoring the mostly wretched voice acting.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If the Hobbit movies were a) set in space and b) not dogshit

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Ghost Ship Games

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
1-4

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/548430/Deep_Rock_Galactic/

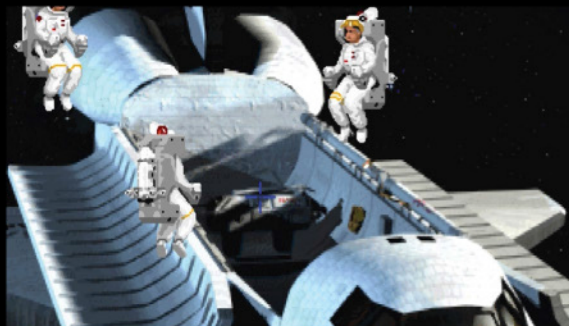
Thankfully, *Deep Rock* is one of those games where the frustrating failures just make me want to try again with improved knowledge of how it actually works. Every early mission is a lesson. From now on, the drop pod is only getting called when I'm basically out of the mine. And I'm not digging straight down ever again. It's also improved by switching from the gunner to the driller, who can grind himself out of this. It also helps to play with other people, as the devs intended. As well as being a knee-slapping exercise in dwarven bonhomie, the multiplayer adds to the existing Warhammer-adjacent feelings, given that it often feels like *Vermintide* with kleptomaniac purpose. The only problem is that I love it so much it's given me the same fervour dwarfs feel at the sight of gold, and I don't know whether to keep mining in *Deep Rock Galactic* or finish drybrushing my Hearthkyn. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Staggeringly deep and replayable. A game no tankard-swiggling dwarf aficionado can afford to ignore.

87

BELOW: You can gossip about teammates while they float next to you.



METEORITE WING

Space, sass and surprises in **THE DIG**

It's strange going into *The Dig* with zero knowledge of what it actually is. I assumed, for some reason, it would be a cheerful archaeology romp; *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* without the whips and hats. The actual game is far weirder. The point-and-click equivalent of that kombucha gif.

The story centres around an asteroid on a collision course with Earth. A team of experts are sent into space to divert its course, leaving it in a stable orbit around the planet, essentially making a naff sequel to the moon. I had absolutely no idea about this, and I spend the first five minutes wondering why more people don't berate Michael Bay's gormless cosmic action film, *Armageddon*, for nicking the idea. But instead of miners, the team sent into space includes geologists, astronauts and, more

inexplicably, a journalist. It's a self-own, but I'd argue it's easier to teach astronauts how to write articles than teach reporters the subtleties of manned spaceflight. However, pretty much as soon as the team finishes planting their nuclear explosives on the asteroid, it becomes clear that *The Dig* is something else entirely.

Unlike other Lucasarts games, it's all presented in a dry, direct way, without as much of the same wry humour that defines the company's games. That said, I'm surprised reviewers were as critical as they were. The dialogue seems better written and performed than much of what immediately followed and the cutscenes give a sense of everything being lavish and premium. Unrecouped costs spelled the end of this type of Lucasarts adventure, but *The Dig* deserved better. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£5

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

BROGUE LEGACY

Discovering lost languages in **HEAVEN'S VAULT**

I love the idea that in the future, aliens will analyse toilet graffiti to glean information about the human race. Cue a team of celestial beings, stroking their stardust beards as they unpick masterpieces such as "The naked man fears no pickpocket" and "Yer ma likes scotch eggs and she's vegan".

Heaven's Vault is predicated on a similar, if not identical premise. But instead of scrying filthy limericks on cubicle walls, archaeologist Aliya Elasra travels between planets, accompanied by her unsettling ghost-robot, Six, uncovering ancient script and piecing together fragments of lost civilisations. It's a legitimately challenging, unusually satisfying puzzle that will please anyone with an interest in language or analytical thinking, but it's an acquired taste. The pace is sedate to the point that it

sometimes feels like it's moving backwards. This is even reflected in the way Aliya moves around the map, leaving a shadow of where she was as she moves to a new location.

That leads to the most frustrating element of the game. Traversing the world is often a test of patience. Luckily, everything else here is so haunting and beautiful that it's worth pushing through these niggles to enjoy a unique gaming experience. It's complex and dynamic, with a story that can reveal itself in different ways depending on how you play. And, as you'd expect from a game about linguistics from the 80 Days team, it's a thoughtful, often amusing experience. If you clear your schedule and give it the time it deserves, *Heaven's Vault* feels as unique and valuable as the last 100 roll in a public toilet. ■

82

BELOW: Taken out of context, those italics look strangely aggressive.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
inkle Ltd

PUBLISHER
inkle Ltd

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readers at our official forums
forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



94

GROUP TEST

Optimise your PC's performance with a cool and quiet fan.



100

TECH REPORT

Can you build a gaming PC for £400 in 2024?

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TECH TALES

The agony of waiting for Nvidia's RTX 5-series.

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BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a top gaming PC no matter your budget.

GROUP TEST

FANS

Keep your PC safe from the heat with the coolest, quietest case fans

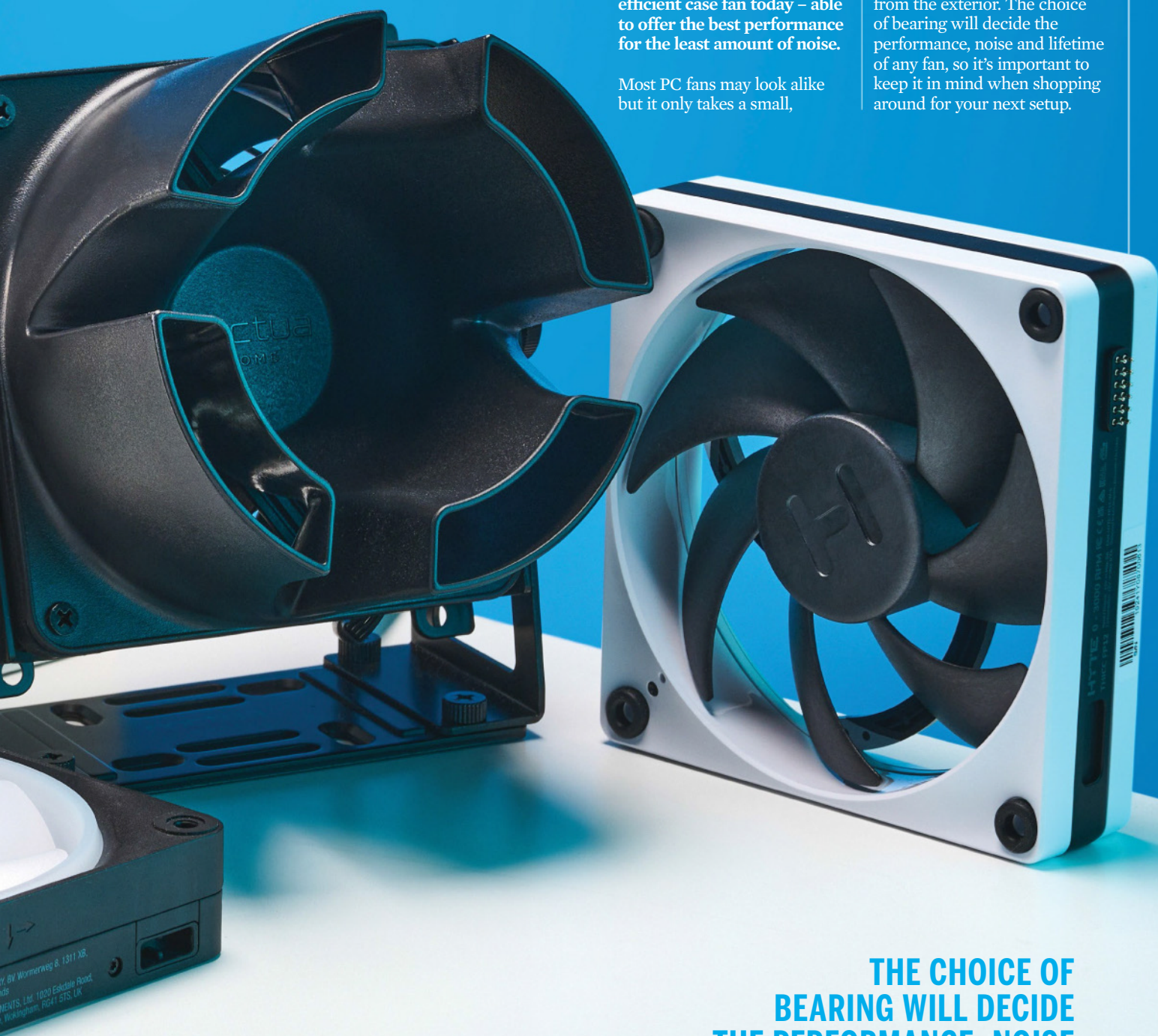
By Jacob Ridley



Summer is here and that means it's time to think about how to keep your PC cool. You thought I was going to talk about going to the beach? Get a grip, you're reading PC Gamer. I'm on the lookout for the most efficient case fan today – able to offer the best performance for the least amount of noise.

Most PC fans may look alike but it only takes a small,

seemingly inconsequential change for a night and day variation in performance. The gap between the fan blade and the frame, for example, seems like a tiny detail but this often separates the very best PC fans from the very worst. There are also differences imperceptible from the exterior. The choice of bearing will decide the performance, noise and lifetime of any fan, so it's important to keep it in mind when shopping around for your next setup.



**THE CHOICE OF
BEARING WILL DECIDE
THE PERFORMANCE, NOISE
AND LIFETIME OF ANY FAN**



NF-A12x25

NOCTUA £29

Simply the best

1 Ask around and you'll hear the same advice from seasoned PC builders, and that's that Noctua makes a mean fan. Dig a little deeper and you'll hear one recommended more than most: the NF-A12x25. It's a superb fan with an exceptional ability to do a good job in nearly any situation. In my testing, it was the quietest fan at 1,200 RPM yet one of the best for airflow – that's a bountiful combination of high performance and low noise. It's also well-suited to use cases where pressure is important, such as on a CPU cooler or liquid cooler radiator. The frame is built

from liquid-crystal polymer and there's a gap of only 0.5 mm between it and the fan blades. Noctua uses a proprietary bearing design in the NF-A12x25, a self-stabilising oil-pressure system, which claims a durability of 150,000 hours. All of which comes together to make a fan that's absolutely excellent on all counts. You can forget all about RGB lighting, however, as the NF-A12x25 is only available in black or beige and brown.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent performance
- All-rounder
- Quiet

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 2,000 RPM / AIRFLOW: 60.09 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 2.34 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: 4-PIN PWM / BEARING: SS02 (NOCTUA)

iCUE Link QX120 RGB

CORSAIR £45

RGB glory

2 I still own my first set of case fans with LEDs inside them. A set from Corsair with four white LEDs built into the corners of the frame. I distinctly remember how wicked I thought they were at the time. Yet compared to the QX120, they're almost comically unimpressive – Corsair has truly taken RGB lighting to another level with this fan.

There's no sign of a single LED across the QX. But don't worry, it has plenty. There are 34 LEDs within the fan, diffused beneath fan hub and frame. This gives a uniform appearance to the lighting effects and this fan looks

fantastic whirring inside a chassis. A magnetic bearing also keeps this fan pretty quiet.

You'll want a set of the QX120 fans for the full effect – a set of three is best. That way, you're able to hook them all together using the magnetic snap-together connection system, which removes the need for unnecessary cables. The iCUE app is a requirement, however, and you'll need to connect these fans up to an iCUE Link hub.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous lighting
- Magnetic bearing
- iCUE app requirement

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 2,400 RPM / AIRFLOW: 63.1 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 3.8 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: iCUE LINK / BEARING: MAGNETIC DOVE



GROUP TEST

NF-P12 redux-1700

NOCTUA **£13**

Affordable excellence

3 Noctua's finest fan is expensive, which is why I've also tested a more affordable option from the Austrian cooling company, the NF-P12 redux-1700. This fan is one of very few Noctua fans available in a bold and exciting colourway – a vibrant, um, grey.

For the record, I do actually like the grey. The notched fan blades, which serve a purpose as 'vortex control', give it an overall aggressive styling. But this fan is more about performance than looks, and you shouldn't underestimate it for its more affordable price tag, it's one of the top in my testing – it even

comes out top for airflow at 1,200 RPM. The downside is the noise it generates. Unlike the NF-12x25, the redux runs loud at 1,200 RPM compared to the others. It also doesn't come with anti-vibration mounts in the box, which don't help. Since you can get a lot out of this fan at lower speeds, I'd recommend setting a gentle fan curve to run it slower, keep the noise to a minimum, and still maintain excellent component temperatures.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Inexpensive
- Excellent performance
- Louder than A12x25

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 1,700 RPM / AIRFLOW: 70.75 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 2.83 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: 4-PIN PWM / BEARING: SSO (NOCTUA)

Thicc FP12

HYTE **£80 (3-pack)**

With two Cs

4 The Hyte Thicc FP12 may look like your everyday case fan but each fan is able to connect to another through a magnetic connection that saves on cables. Not quite your standard fare, then. It's also a part of a larger ecosystem, including the Q60 liquid cooler and LS10 light strips, which all hook together through USB Type-C connections.

If you're building your PC from scratch and you're willing to go all in on Hyte, there's a lot to like about this all-in-one cooling and lighting system. You can connect each fan to the Portal NP50 controller or to the hub within the

Q60 cooler and everything is controlled via the Nexus app. The downside to this sort of system is that it's proprietary and a lot of unnecessary steps for anyone after straightforward non-RGB chassis fans. Though the FP12 fan itself is an excellent performer. It's almost as quiet as the NF-A12x25 at 1,200 RPM and able to deliver a touch more airflow. It will also crank up to a whopping 3,000 RPM to deliver the best airflow I've tested.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Fast
- Effective
- Loud at high RPM

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 3,000 RPM / AIRFLOW: 105.8 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 8.14 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: NEXUS LINK/4-PIN PWM / BEARING: FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING



SAVE A LITTLE CASH
AND BUILD YOURSELF
AN AWESOME DESK FAN

5



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Airflow: Higher is better for case fan use. The amount of air that passes through the fan at a set speed, usually measured in m³/h or cubic feet per minute (CFM)

Static pressure: Higher is better for radiator use. The amount of air pressure produced by a fan, measured in mm H₂O.

Fluid dynamic bearing: These are often some of the longest lasting and quietest fans around, though they can be costly.

Sleeve bearing: Usually the cheapest, these tend to wear out quicker than other bearing types.

Rifle bearing: These are improved sleeved bearings, usually with a longer lifespan and lower noise.

Ball bearing: Ball bearings are very reliable but can become noisy with age.

Magnetic bearings: Maglev fans are more durable and quieter than most traditional bearings, but can be costly.

PWM: Four-pin PWM fans offer more steps of control versus 3-pin DC fans. Most motherboard connectors are four-pin today, though these are also compatible with often cheaper 3-pin fans.

F120 RGB Duo

NZXT £37

Zhuzh for less

5 More affordable RGB is a bit of an oxymoron. You could save heaps just by ditching the LEDs altogether. But if you really must bling your PC – and who among us hasn't at least been tempted to – you can find options that'll let you do so for less, such as NZXT's F120 RGB Duo. You can find cheaper sets of fans with LEDs adorned, but rarely with usable software or a sense of style. The F120 offers both: NZXT's mostly fine CAM software controls the lighting and a diffuse RGB lighting ring made up of 20 LEDs encircles the blades on both sides. It looks

great, and importantly it's easy to set up. Though performance in testing was a bit of a let-down, coming in dead last for airflow and noise. Though unlike the Corsair iCUE Link fans, which magnetically connect to one another, the F120 requires two cables for each fan in the system – one for the fan and another for the lighting. That's six cables for three fans – though an RGB controller included in the kit takes some of the pain out of set-up.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Affordable
- Noisy
- Lots of cables

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 1,800 RPM / AIRFLOW: 84.75 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 2.72 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: 4-PIN PWM + RGB HEADER / BEARING: FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING

NV-FS1

NOCTUA £86

Personal cooling

6 Anyone with a high-performance gaming PC will know what it's like to game through the height of summer. Just a couple of games into a modest session and I'm already sweatier than a ranked *Rocket League* match. But that's where the Noctua NV-FS1 has helped out a ton – it's quite possibly the best desk fan for PC builders. OK, so it's not a PC fan, though it is built around one: a single 120 mm Noctua NF-A12x25 chromax.black. As mentioned in this group test, this is a mighty good fan to stick at the heart of any build, and it's equally effective within the FS1.

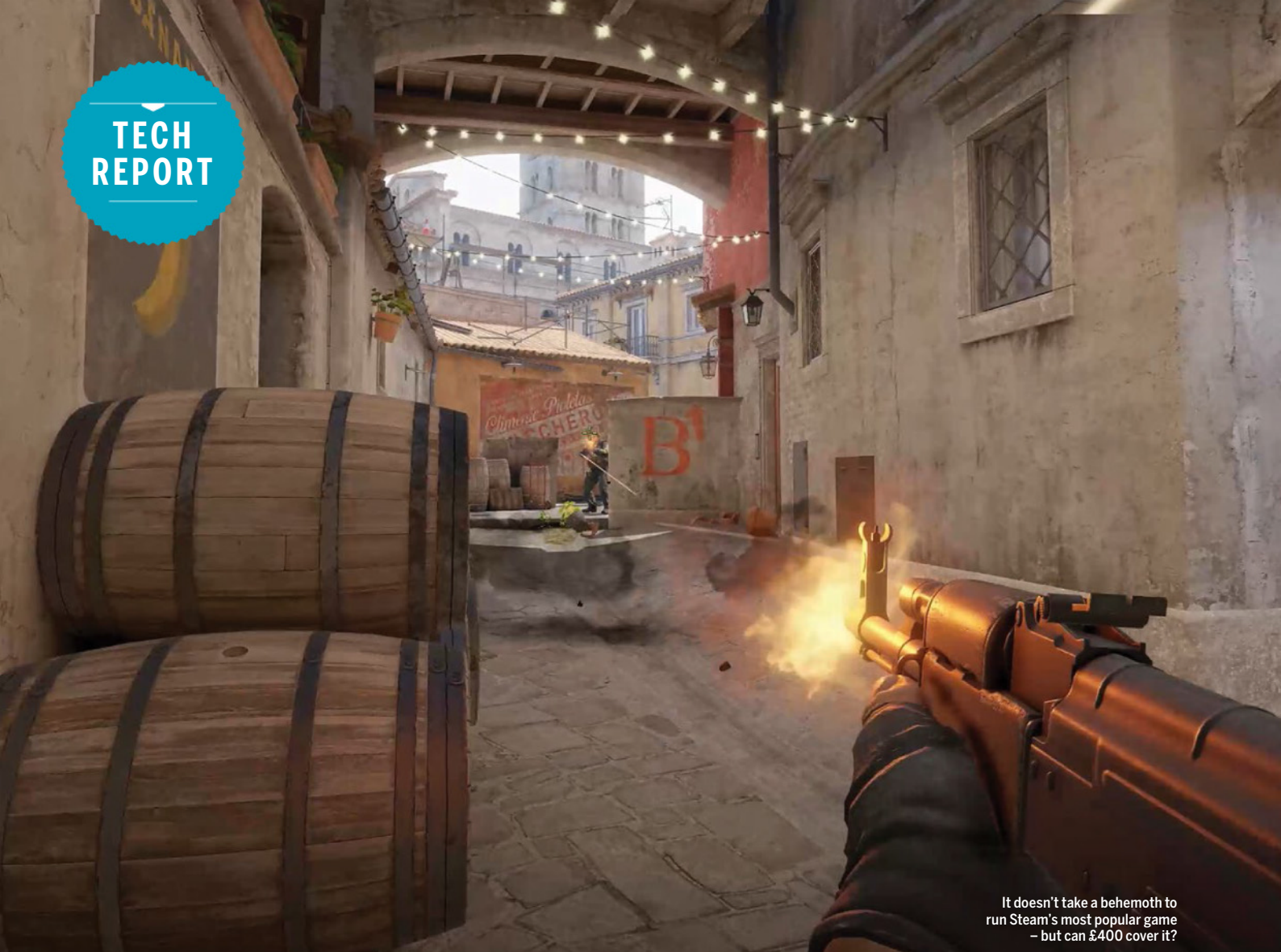
It's quiet, and thanks to something called an Airflow Amplifier, it blows plenty of cool air across my face.

Why it's so neat for PC builders comes down to its modularity. It can be bought as a single unit, fan included, or come as separate parts to build yourself. That means if you already have a Noctua 120mm fan going spare, you can save a little cash and build yourself an awesome desk fan.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Nerdy
- Quiet
- Modular

SPECS SIZE: 120 MM / MAX SPEED: 2,000 RPM / AIRFLOW: 60.09 CFM / STATIC PRESSURE: 2.34 MM H₂O / CONNECTION: 4-PIN PWM / BEARING: SS02 (NOCTUA)



It doesn't take a behemoth to run Steam's most popular game – but can £400 cover it?

FOUR PLAY

Can you build a gaming PC for **£400** in 2024?

Four-hundred is, as any of PC Gamer's 12 editors will tell you, a large number. It's an incredible volume of magazines spanning 30 years, housing PC gaming's near-entire history. 400 pounds sterling, though, seems a smaller number. Particularly when you browse PC component retailers, rubbing your eyes theatrically at the number of extra digits that appear to have been mistakenly added to the price of – well, everything.

For this historic 400th issue, an experiment is in order. Is it possible to build a gaming PC for £400 or less, during an era when the latest Nvidia GPUs cost seven Bitcoins each? In this accursed age it seems basically impossible to pop to the shop for a Pot Noodle and some Andrex without walking out £34.97 lighter in the pockets, so this will be a profoundly difficult endeavour. But let's do it anyway.

First: some rules. We need to identify what a 'gaming PC' is, and in the context of this magazine it seems reasonable that it should be a PC that runs games. Good? Good. We're all agreed on that. Let's also specify what a PC is. A PC is not a monitor, nor is it a mouse or a keyboard. Or an RGB headset that transforms your voice into that of Terry Crews. Those things are all mandatory for playing games, especially the latter, but they're additional purchases outside our budget. Now then: which games exactly should it be able to run?

The most popular game on Steam right now – and for the foreseeable future – is *Counter-Strike 2*, a shooter that's been at the very bosom of PC gaming culture in its various forms since 2000. It's the most PC game of all PC games, and that means it's the benchmark for this experiment.

Counter-Strike 2's minimum system requirements are as follows: an Intel Core i5 750 or higher, 8GB RAM, and a 1GB DX11 GPU with Shader Model 5.0 support. It requires 85GB of disk space, and must be running on at least Windows 10. The latter has its own minimum requirements of course, but CS2's specs should cover both.

Our first port of call: will a Raspberry Pi handle the task? The latest version of this miraculously small and bargainous device bundles 8GB of RAM, a 32GB SD card, and it even comes with a mouse and keyboard. All that for the princely sum of £130. It's an incredible accomplishment, motivated by a truly noble cause to make computers and web access more available across the socioeconomic spectrum. But its lack of sufficient GPU processing means it won't play CS2 so it can frankly get in the bin.

THIRD-PARTY HELP

Hold on, though. With some third-party help, you can actually use an external GPU with Raspberry Pi 5. Available for £25, Pineboards makes an adapter called the UPCity that adds a PCIe X4 slot, so in theory you could chuck your RTX 4090 into

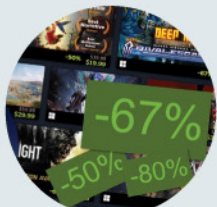


Cheap as chips

Although the cost of living has soared lately, the cost of PCs over a 30-year span has actually decreased. The retailer ads in magazines from 1993 reveal that the cheapest, entry-level systems sold without monitors or accessories would have set you back between £375 and £400. In modern money that equates to: really expensive.

AUSTERITY MEASURES

Cash-saving PC gaming tips



STEAM SALES

Install them, then uninstall them and leave them unplayed for eternity.



WAIT FOR X070 TI SUPER

Usually positioned 1fps faster than the X070 and 1FPS slower than the X080. Bargain.



CRYPTO FARMS

Once the cause of the great GPU shortage, now going on eBay for peanuts. WE win, crypto bros.



RGB LIGHT STRIPS

Absolutely cover your living space with these, and never turn a lightbulb on again.



a Raspberry Pi. And while that's clearly madness, maybe there's something in this concept.

AMD's Radeon HD 5700XT and Nvidia's GTX 1080 are both available used for about £150, and they'll both give you ample performance in CS2 paired with the Pi 5's 64-bit, quad-core ARM Cortex-A76 processor running at 2.4 GHz.

Of course, either card would need its own PSU. Both require 500W of juice, and GameMax sells a 500W unit for about £35. Which is fine. As the old saying goes, when buying power supplies for delicate electrical equipment, always scrimp and go for the cheapest option possible.

Our total so far for the Raspberry Pi 5, PCIe X4 breakout, GPU and PSU is £340. That leaves plenty left over for a copy of Windows 10 (£30 to you, since you're a mate) and crucially, enough for a 128GB SD card which will give us enough space to install the OS and *Counter-Strike 2*. SanDisk sells one for £13.49.

However, our creation does come with some obvious downsides. Firstly, it's less of a gaming PC and more like 'some gaming components connected to each other by wires, on a desk'. Housing that componentry would require a case that we no longer have the budget for, and without it dust, wear, and indeed, tear, all become a factor. You're also a bit limited by its four USB ports, and performance isn't going to be stellar, in CS2 or otherwise.

There's an easier option. Specialist PC builders like Bedrock Computers offer complete builds for under £400. The latter's Skyline build is yours for £340 and features a GTX 970 4GB, an Intel Core i5 4590 and

16GB RAM with a 1TB hard drive. And it's even installed inside a PC case, which really shows up our Raspberry abomination. You could go even lower, in fact. Bedrock's entry-level PC build is priced at £190, and the parts will still just about run CS2.

Maybe PC gaming is still affordable, then, 400 issues and 30 years after PC Gamer began its journey. The ceiling for enthusiast spending levels has risen exponentially, as has the level of performance which we now generally

consider to be 'playable' – max settings was a pipe dream in the Windows XP days, whereas now anything below 120 perfectly synced frames at the highest preset in 4K is grounds for a good old-fashioned review-bombing.

It's great that the culture has evolved, and that our relationship with our pastime has deepened to the degree that a PC is now a form of self-expression, informed as much by automotive tuner culture as raw functionality. But now and then, it's healthy for us to reflect that PC gaming's a broad church, that max settings are a luxury, and that if you really wanted, you could (probably) play CS2 on a £130 Raspberry Pi. ■

Phil Iwanik

TOP: System builders offer options below £400, and even at less than £200.

ABOVE: The humble GTX 1080, 2016's finest circuitry, now very affordable.

IN THEORY YOU COULD CHUCK YOUR RTX 4090 INTO A RASPBERRY PI

FIVE'S ALIVE

The agony of waiting for **RTX 5-SERIES**

Buying a graphics card feels increasingly like closing on a house or starting a small business. It was once as simple as saving up about 300 quid, triple-checking which slots your mobo supported, and then buying the big box with the fanciest-looking fantasy character on it. The more fireballs and face paint, the better the graphics card within.

However, crypto farmers, lockdowns and egregious manufacturer price-hiking have made that purchase considerably more complex in the last five years. At least, that's the excuse I'm giving people if they ask why I'm still using an RTX 2080 Ti. Once Nvidia's pride and joy, the card they'd use on comparison slides with massive green bar charts showing all the extra frames it could produce, it's now chugging along a bit. It doesn't support DLSS frame generation. It never really got on with *Cyberpunk*. It takes a deep breath whenever I hover over a 'max' preset in a graphics settings menu.

I'm finally in a position to responsibly make the upgrade, too. I've paid for the higher-priority outlays. That weird whirring noise coming from the back of my car has been sorted, my teeth are restored to TV-presenter white, and I can drop the required grand-and-a-bit on a GPU without staring up at the ceiling at 4AM worrying about the financial consequences for the next month. The trouble is, now is the worst possible time to actually buy one.

TWILIGHT OF THE CURRENT-GEN CARDS

We're right at the twilight of current-gen cards' lifespans. RDNA 3 and RTX 4-series are sitting on their porch swings, sucking Werther's Originals and watching the sun go down, ready to be replaced by RDNA 4 and RTX 5-series in Q3 24 – at least, that's the expectation, based on both AMD and Nvidia's previous card gen cadences. That means buying the best available GPU hardware now would be an exercise

in investing in obsolescence. An RTX 4090 would still work after the 5090 comes along, of course. Jensen Huang doesn't have a giant lever in his office that he pulls once the new generation releases, switching all older models off forever. However, the £1,500+ required to secure one in this lead-up to the new gen's arrival would start to look like an incredible waste of money very quickly.

The 4090 runs roughly 50-75% quicker than a 3090, depending on the specific title and output res, a giant performance gain that surely had 3090 owners feeling slightly bitter about the £1,000+ they shelled out.

Progress isn't linear, though. We don't know all the details about AMD and Nvidia's next-gen cards, or their pricing. If team green hikes the MSRP of its flagship card up even further this generation, the 4090 might well remain the soundest investment, regardless of what the bar charts say about FPS

differences. Early reports and rumours imply that RDNA 4 won't feature an all-conquering, super-expensive flagship card to rival Nvidia's top-end performance, but will instead target the midrange. More unconfirmed rumours suggest that Nvidia will continue to strive for outright performance, releasing a 5090 that tops its predecessor in all key specs from ray tracing cores (up from 128 to 192) to memory bandwidth (up from 1,008GB/s to 1,532GB/s).

MONITOR UPGRADE

The best course of action during this uncertainty, of course, is inaction. But it's hard to sit on your hands when 4K, high refresh rate OLED monitors are finally becoming mainstream. Alienware's superlative AW3225QF is a no-brainer monitor upgrade over my ageing but dependable 60HZ Hazro IPS, but I won't get anywhere near the framerates required to enjoy its higher refresh rates at 4K on a 2080 Ti.

RTX 3090s are more affordable than ever. You can pick up a used or ex-display example for around £500 now, and for anyone gaming at 1080p that's going to be all the card

**THE 4090 RUNS
ROUGHLY 50-75%
QUICKER THAN
A 3090**

RDNA 4 is unlikely to go toe-to-toe with Nvidia's high-end cards, targeting the midrange instead.



PHIL IWANIK
PCG's very own Martin Lewis, freelancer Phil recently paid £7.87 for six bananas after unwittingly leaning on the self-service checkout scales. "I thought that was just how much they cost now."

GENERATION GAMES *Four ways to pass the time before the next GPU gen*



EBAYING STUFF

Someone wants your dusty veteran hardware. Raise some funds by finding a new home for it online.



PLAYING INDIES

So you can't hit 120FPS in the latest AAAs anymore. Time to finally play *Balatro*, since you've had it installed since February.



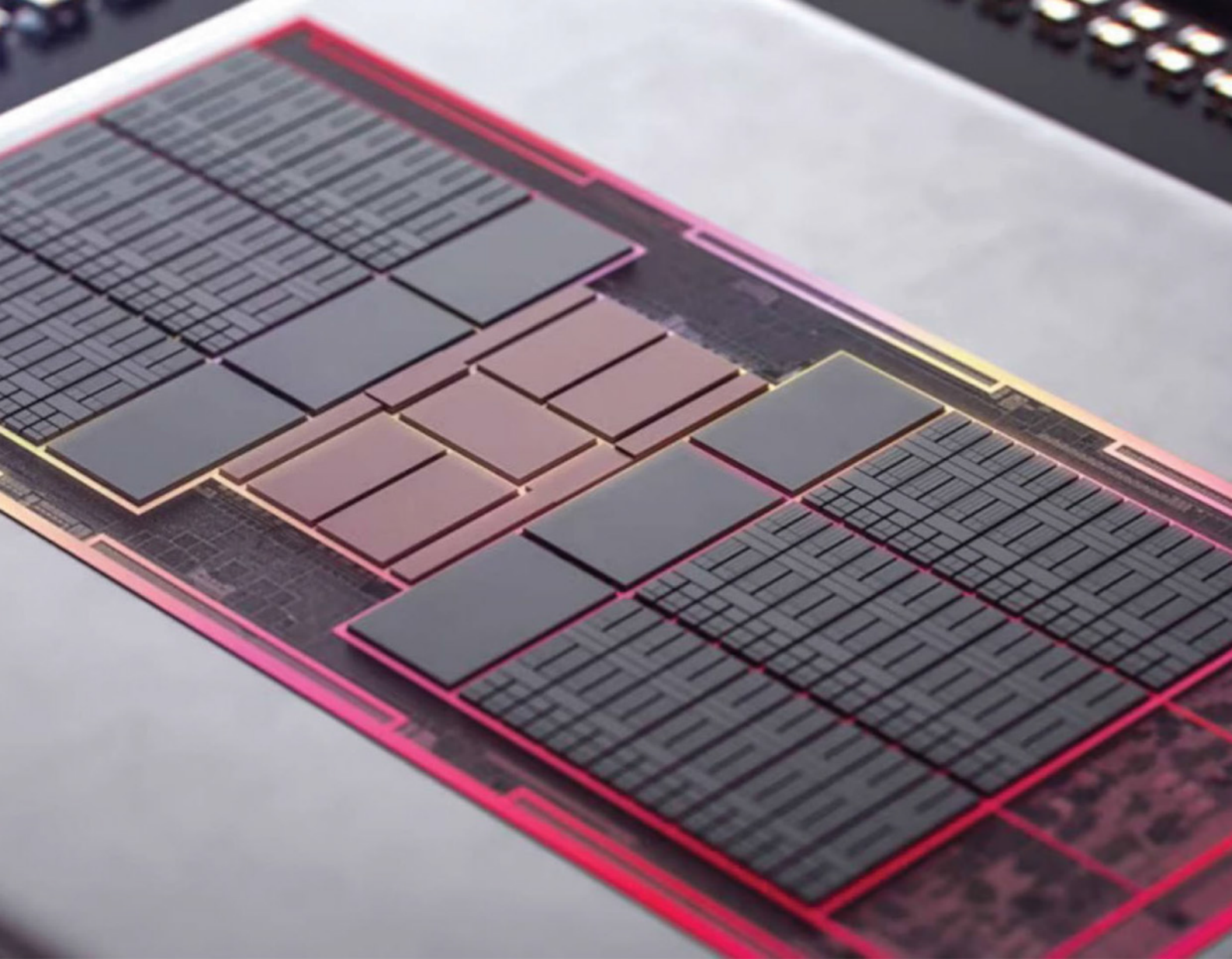
SCOUR FOR RUMOURS

Make the hours between now and Q3 melt away by googling the latest unsubstantiated specs and pricing gossip about RDNA 4.



GET INTO OVERCLOCKING

What if you can turn your card into a next-gen model? You can't, but by the time you discover that the new ones will be out.



they need until developers start really digging into Unreal Engine 5's more advanced features. But it doesn't support DLSS 3.5 frame generation, the most important and useful feature within Nvidia's GPU ecosystem. And for all we know, the 5-series cards could gear-gate an equally valuable tech to motivate us into making the upgrade.

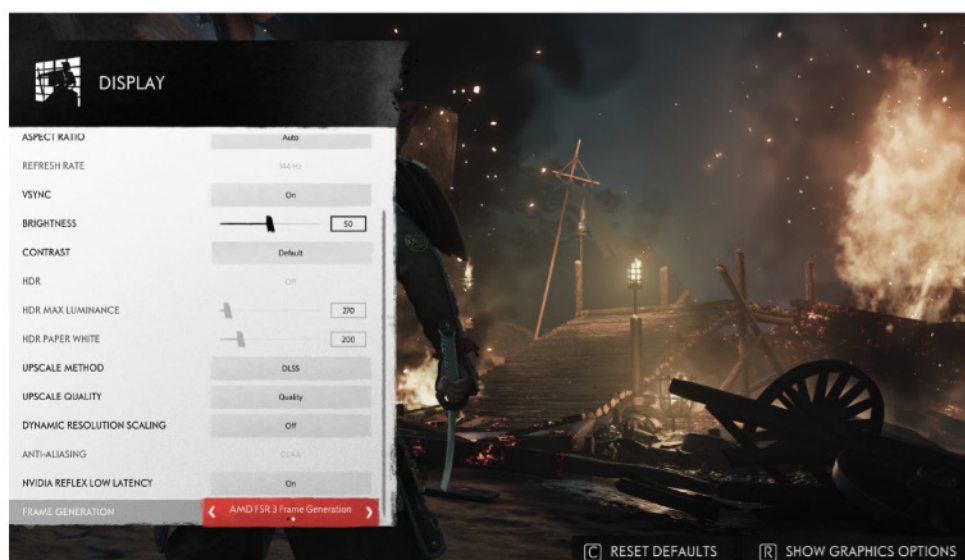
FIRST-WORLD PROBLEM

It's a first-world problem and a half, having to wait an undetermined length of time to enjoy luxurious graphical features and justify a fancy monitor purchase. But it's also a good opportunity to reflect on just how much we've internalised the concept of product lifespans and generations in PC gaming, tacitly accepting that we'll basically have to re-invest large sums every two years to stay at the vanguard of shiny visuals and pro-level FPS figures. It begs the question: are we moving towards a subscription model for PC hardware, instead of one-off purchases? Right now, I'd pay monthly to ensure access to the best GPU hardware whenever it's released. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



FAR LEFT: 240Hz OLED is here, but panels like Alienware's AW3225QF need a lot of GPU to enjoy at their best.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

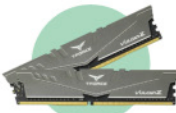
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,008

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £103 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200. This is the sweet spot for RAM right now, as DDR5 can be expensive.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £90 Say it with me now: never skimp on the power supply. This is the minimum recommended for the Radeon GPU.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £67 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape and 8,000 DPI optical sensor delivered in a sleek shell, this wired mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,535

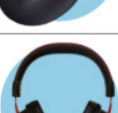
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £390 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Freezer 36 Arctic £24 It's cheap yet effective – you can't ask for more than that. With two fans and four heatpipes, it'll go at up to 1,800 rpm.
MEMORY		Vengeance 16GB DDR5-5200 Corsair £65 This unembellished but reliable memory has everything you need for gaming and more, and brings DDR5 speeds to the party.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £73 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,858

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £229 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Azoth Asus £250 This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha Wireless HyperX £135 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I’ve been reminded of why it took me so long to come back in the first place”

ELDEN RING feels transformed after 40 hours spent with its DLC

Back when I first played *Elden Ring* in that halcyon year of 2022, I made it my personal mission to slay the Tree Sentinel. He’s the first big bad you see when you enter into the Lands Between proper for the first time, so I thought it was my charge to knock him over.

This was a mission I did not finish. This golden prick flattened my tarnished hiney so many times that I just gave up until I had more vigour to play with. So imagine my surprise when, after thoroughly enjoying my playthrough of *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree*, I rolled up a new character and killed him in three tries. I felt like Quicksilver in *Days of Future Past*, plugged into a frequency of time which showed me previously-brutal attacks from miles away.

HARVEY RANDALL



THIS MONTH
Loaded a new *Elden Ring* save for the first time since 2022.

ALSO PLAYED
Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail,
Hades 2

That’s not to say *Elden Ring*’s early game hasn’t been giving me any trouble. Margit turned me into paste a good 15 times before I got him down – but when compared to my failure to kill him at all when I was a similar level in 2022, I started to feel deserving of the name Elden Lord.

Making my prodigal return with my muscle memory still spun up gave me a proper appreciation for FromSoftware’s DLC tutorship – a surprising thing to admire, given the developer’s reputation for cruelty and poison swamps. Miyazaki’s trained

TOP: Sadness ahead.

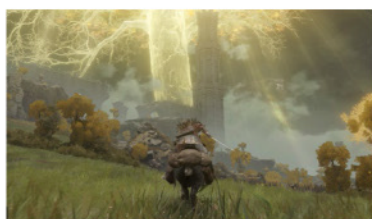
up a legion of dodge rollers, they just won’t know that until they go back for a second try.

Which is, regrettably, a bit of a hard sell for people like me – and without *Shadow of the Erdtree* to get me hungering for more *Elden Ring*, I’m not sure I would’ve done it at all.

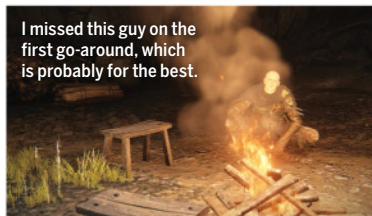
QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Shadow of the Erdtree is incredibly dense. Its environments are packed with stuff to kill you, with legacy dungeons that flow into each other like silk. I rarely felt overwhelmed by its scope. It was a Goldilocks size – not too big, not too small, just right.

**IT WAS A GOLDILOCKS SIZE
– NOT TOO BIG, NOT TOO
SMALL, JUST RIGHT**



I missed this guy on the first go-around, which is probably for the best.



Which made me feel that pang of *Elden Ring* frustration all the more. I've been knee-deep in nostalgia so far, but I've also been reminded of why it took me so long to come back in the first place.

If you're familiar with *Dark Souls*, you'll know an experienced player can rip through the undead burg and get tangling toe-to-toe with gargoyles in under an hour. *Elden Ring*, by contrast, takes so much longer to actually whirr into the real meat of a playthrough. Sure, if you've been playing it non-stop since release, you'll have its huge map in your mind palace – but for me, I've been having to keep a wiki page open just to figure out where I want to go without wasting time.

I'm glad to be playing *Elden Ring* again – I have surely missed it – but I wonder if I'll make it to the end again. My first playthrough took about 90 hours, give or take. Do I really have that kind of time again?

I'm peachy keen to keep pressing on regardless. Who knows. Maybe I'll start loving the fresh save scavenger hunt FromSoftware has mandated. But I can't help wishing that I was playing an *Elden Ring* with *Shadow of the Erdtree*'s intimate, close-looming environments instead. ■



The Starborn Gravis Suit looks good.

“I’m now actually having fun”

Finally jumping to lightspeed in **STARFIELD**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Downloaded mods,
lots of mods.

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon Age II, Crysis 3

I tried to like *Starfield* when it first launched, I really did. I'd enjoyed all of Bethesda's past RPGs in some form or other but, as our *Starfield* review indicated could happen, I found myself cold, held at arm's length from the developer's biggest-ever virtual creation.

But then, out of the blue, *Starfield* got the game's new Creations centre, and it's been the game-changer I've been waiting for. Creations is essentially a way to find and enable mods in your game, but where it differs from, say, just downloading *Starfield* mods from Nexus Mods, Creations is built in to the game and, crucially, tracks across your account no matter where you play. This has allowed me to install a number of great mods easily, and have the same experience across systems. The result? I'm now actually having fun playing *Starfield*.

COSMIC MODS

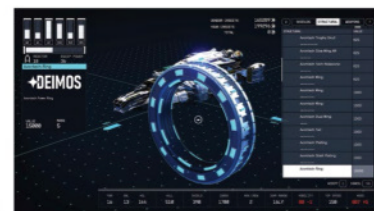
Here's but a few of the mods I'm using right now that I feel are making the difference. The *Wondrous Weightlessness [All Resources Edition]* by Trainwiz is a super-simple mod

that makes resource items in your inventory not take up any weight. While *Smarter Spacesuit Auto-Hide* by Deebz hides your spacesuit while inside a sealed starship or safe, breathable planet, so you don't have to keep taking it on and off again.

Then there's the *Improved Follower Behavior* mod, also by Deebz, that simply reduces the distance to you that your companions keep. This means no more losing a companion in the beyond, or finding yourself fighting an army while your mate is six rooms away, faffing about. And the Bethesda-made *Starborn Gravis Suit* not only looks aces but has great defensive specs, too.

There are plenty of cosmetic upgrades, too, including the excellent *a6 Exclusive Clothes* mod by A6addon, which simply allows you to craft 48 outfits at any Industrial Workbench for one cosmetic. Oh, and the *Starfield Hair+Beards* by zone79, which provides so more options for character customisation as well.

Finally, there's the excellent *Avontech Shipyards* by kaos_nyrb, which adds a ton of new ship parts, and there's the *Ship Pieces Unlocked* mod by SayHelloToMrBullet that makes ship-building more intuitive. ■



“Fashion is the real endgame in most MMOs, let’s be honest”

I’m accidentally taking **SKY: CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT** way too seriously

I’ve been away from the MMOs of my past – taking a bit of a rest from sinking thousands of hours into *Guild Wars 2* or *The Elder Scrolls* online – and to fill their place I’ve been playing, well, another MMO. But a cosy one.

Sky: Children of the Light is a beautiful and casual MMO from the developer of *Journey*, which somehow managed to take the same flying and sand surfing that made their two-hour PlayStation game a hit and turn it into a multiplatform live service phenomenon. I turned to *Sky* occasionally on my Nintendo Switch for a few years but after it finally launched on PC this spring I’ve been back into it pretty aggressively.

Sky’s primary activities are exploration and platforming challenges, collecting currency (candles) out in the world where it regenerates each day, and finding new ‘spirit’ characters in the world to purchase emotes and cosmetics from. At an abstract level, most of my time in *Sky* is spent just like in other MMOs: I do small daily quests during

▶ LAUREN MORTON



THIS MONTH
Bought a cute little scarf after an event ticket grind.

ALSO PLAYED
Tiny Bookshop demo,
Elden Ring

season events with new content, go on weekly trips through the endgame to earn ascended candles, and grind for regular currency to keep expanding my wardrobe. Because fashion is the real endgame in most MMOs, let’s be honest.

Recently I’ve been on that exponential upward curve in playtime where I’m grinding for currency as optimally as possible so I can be one of those MMO magnates who can afford new clothes the same day they hit the game. Longtime players are all completely decked out in fashion from prior seasons and

MAINTAINS A PRETTY PACKED CALENDAR OF OVERLAPPING SEASONS

holidays and recently I was dying to grab the rainbow cape from the yearly Days of Color in June I’ve seen so many others sporting. *Sky* maintains a pretty packed calendar of overlapping seasons, shorter events, and holidays so I’m never short of a piece of gear to thirst after.

FINDING MY PEOPLE

My current struggle in *Sky* has been on the social side. Unlike most MMOs it doesn’t have a global chat system – text chat between players is pretty restricted by design – and no guild or party system, also very intentionally. It’s built on the same concept of anonymised friendships between players that originally made *Journey* so magical. I buy into the mystique of it all, but making pals organically has been a struggle, so I’ve turned to *Sky*-related Discord servers as a means to add friends to do daily quests with.

Turning to Discord has helped me find that sense of community I was hoping would keep me engaged in playing, though it’s also made sure I turn this cute and cosy game into the same MMO grind I was trying to take a break from. Whoops. ■



My newest outfit is giving ‘airline stewardess’ vibes, but I’m into it.



LEFT: Proposing friendship to someone whose outfit I admire.



BELOW: Cinnamoroll’s crossover event was an adorable source of cute cosmetics.



“In later episodes he wants to raise slugs, and even buy a solar system”

A return to the **CRYSTAL CAVES** brings back memories of magazines from the past

I was reminded of *Crystal Caves* this month when looking at old PC Format magazine cover discs, because a man's got to have a hobby, and noticed that a demo of it was given away with the first issue I remember buying. PC Format is long gone, of course, and sadly missed, but *Crystal Caves* endures – it's on Steam and GOG in remastered form.

This is an Apogee game, the company founded in 1987 that changed to 3D Realms, made *Duke Nukem 3D*, and got into a complicated licensing arrangement with another company called Apogee. But this is the Apogee that published *Commander Keen* and *Wolfenstein 3D*, and *Crystal Caves* was released under the shareware model, where a demo was freely distributed, and you paid for the rest of the game if you liked it. George Broussard of *Duke Nukem* fame did some work on the game, and today it has a chunky pixel charm even if it's not in widescreen.

IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Mined crystals and farmed twibbles for fun and profit.

ALSO PLAYED
Baldur's Gate III, *Stardew Valley*

DIAMOND GEEZER

As a platform game, the idea is to guide space miner Mylo Steamwitz through a hub level and into doors that lead to the caves themselves. There's a vague plot about Mylo trying to mine enough crystals to buy himself a twibble farm, the Star Trek-inspired creatures being the galaxy's latest must-have craze. In later episodes he wants to raise medicinal slugs, and even buy a whole solar system to rent out as a holiday resort. The game is a constant

TOP: You only have three health points, so watch out for those monsters.

one-last-mission setup with Mylo inches away from making it big.

But back to the crystals. This isn't *Spelunky*, and every cave has neatly laid out walkways, pipes and even floating elevators waiting for him. There are of course crystals, refills for Mylo's rocket launcher and patrolling monsters which can take multiple hits to kill. Then it adds treasure chests, locked doors, levels with inverted gravity and, in the HD version at least, a level editor.

Playing *Crystal Caves* in 2024, more than 30 years after I first took the plunge, I wonder how I stuck with it. It's hard, you need to be precise, and I keep getting the jump and attack buttons muddled up. There's a lot to be said, however, for having a limited choice of things to do. Today I have access to a lot of games and never know what to play. Back then, there were the demos from the PC Format cover floppy, or the copy of *LHX Attack Chopper* I'd never learned how to play properly and didn't have a manual for. So I stuck with it, and mined a deep seam of fun that's now a happy memory. ■

GEORGE BROUSSARD OF DUKE NUKEM FAME DID SOME WORK ON THE GAME

DIABLO IV

Diablo is good now (reprise). *By Jody Macgregor*

The number of currencies you're expected to collect in modern games seems absurd, but never more so than when *Diablo IV* gives them names like anguished goth poetry. To open your Tortured Gifts you need Aberrant Cinders, and you should be looking out for Baneful Hearts, which can be used at Accursed Nests to summon a boss who can be killed to farm Exquisite Blood.

I made fun of this in a tweet where I invented a bunch of currencies in the same style, suggesting "future patches will let you foment Pain Shards by transmorphing Wound Imps into Malfesance Tokens, instead of having to distress your own Affliction Coins". I thought Pain Shards was a bit on the nose, then a subsequent update added a currency called Shards of Agony so actually I didn't go far enough.

And yet here I am in Season 4 running Helltides to collect Fiend Roses. They got me, and all they had to do to win me over was give me a bunch of free stuff – and speed up the levelling.

This season is subtitled Loot Reborn, and the focus is on giving players more and doing it faster. It arrived at the same time as a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 5, 2023

DEVELOPER
Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Blizzard Entertainment

LINK
diablo4.blizzard.com

temporary game-wide 50% boost to gold drops and a 25% boost to XP, and the difference that makes is remarkable. I'm on my third character now, so being able to race up the levels is a delight. I just want to unlock all the skills now, don't make me wait.

MALFEASANCE TOKENS

When I see a treasure goblin, my sorcerer wails on them with lightning that crawls along the ground like electric worms just like in the original *Diablo*, and when they run away I teleport alongside to smack my Arc Lash in their face until they give up their loot, which now includes a bonus bag you can open to make it rain again – a little delayed gratification to save for when you're in town so you don't overfill your inventory. It feels good, especially compared to how stingy *Diablo IV* was at launch.

I did have to wait to get into Helltides, though. These intense events, painting part of the map red and filling it with higher-level enemies, were previously only

available in World Tier 3, unlocked by finishing the story then running a special Capstone Dungeon. Part of this season's generosity is making Helltides available in every World Tier, but I didn't realise until I was hours in that you need to skip the campaign to get at Helltides right away. I'd elected to replay story mode, and had to finish eating my plot vegetables before I could have my Helltide dessert.

It's easy to make mistakes like this in the information overload of live-service games. Season 4 has a laundry list of changes like adding manuals with affixes, or modifiers, you can add to items by tempering them, as well as special crafting

STUFF DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE ACQUISITIVENESS

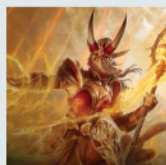
materials found in a megadungeon called the Pit of Artificers that let you masterwork items. It adds pets, Andariel as a summonable boss, and a questline including the Iron Wolves and a whole separate reward system earned by ranking up their Wolf's Honor. Like the currency overgrowth, it's a pile of stuff designed to encourage acquisitiveness and FOMO, all wrapped in a bunch of words you'll find next to 'miserable' in the thesaurus.

I can't deny I enjoyed my third run-through of the campaign. Story has never been the strong point of a *Diablo* game, which rely on characters doing dumb shit all the way back to the protagonist of the first game trying to ensure the soulstone he'd trapped Satan in was safe by jamming it directly into his own forehead, but Blizzard's high-budget cutscenes remain impressive. I happily sat through the whole Lord of the Rings-style battle for Hell cinematic yet again.

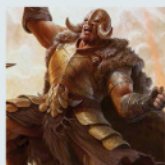
And then, story out of the way, I jumped into a Helltide, a monster-rich environment that boils *Diablo* down to purest click frenzy. Freeze some imps, teleport to a succubus, drop a big electric AoE, collect loot, rinse and repeat. Turns out if you call a Skinner Box a Gloom Casket or a Dismal Receptacle or something, I will happily climb inside and turn out the light. ■

LOOK BOOK

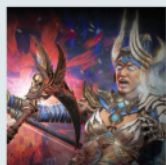
Embrace fashion while the world burns



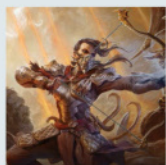
HOT WIZARD
You'll be on fire and so will your enemies in this corset/shoulder pads combo complete with funeral veil.



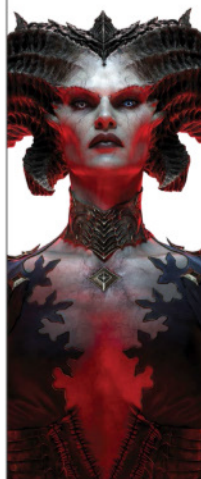
BARBARISHINE
These Viking furs are offset by classic gold armour, sure to make you the glitteriest barbarian in any meat hall.



DEMIGOD
Channel a Greek god in the moment before they hurl a lightning bolt with these armour plates and bikini top.

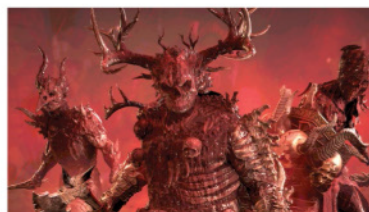


COLD ROGUE
Make every shout of "Fire!" fashionably ironic with arrows made of ice, and a steel mask that communicates cool.

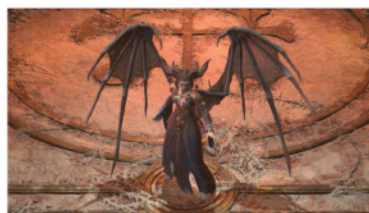




ABOVE: Deckard Cain.



LEFT: If having bones inside is good, having bones outside as well is twice as good.



Diablo's angels look like someone electrified a spiderweb.



THE BLACK PARADE

This sumptuous fan-made Thief campaign is an essential play for stealth fans. *By Rick Lane*

Thief: *The Black Parade* is far more than just a level pack for Looking Glass' landmark stealth game. It's a fully-fledged, story driven campaign that acts as both a companion to and an elevation of the ideas explored in the original. Set across ten huge, palpably strange levels, it offers everything stealth fans could possibly want from such a project.

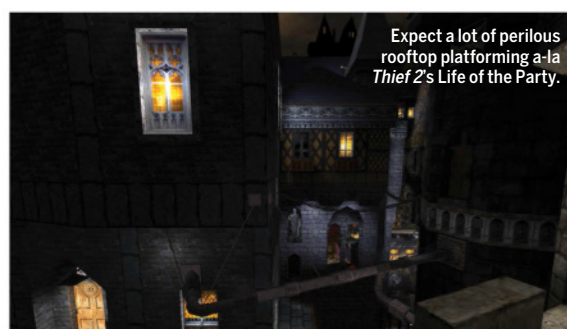
Everything, that is, except Garrett. *The Black Parade's* story runs alongside the events of *The Dark Project*, and as such you play as a new protagonist. Hume is a rougher, gruffer larcenist than Garrett, lacking the master thief's near-supernatural skills. Indeed, *The Black Parade* starts with Hume returning from an eight-year sentence of hard labour, seeking a way back into The City's criminal underworld. And it doesn't

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE November 30, 2023	DEVELOPER Feuillade Industries
PUBLISHER Feuillade Industries	LINK moddb.com

take long before he's in over his head, forced to do a series of increasingly dangerous jobs for one of The City's many corrupt lords.

Playing as Hume feels, for the most part, like playing as Garrett. He even has a conveniently filched light gem just like the mainline protagonist. But there are a few mechanical differences. Lacking Garrett's Keeper training, Hume will alert enemies if they bump into him, making him slightly harder to play as. To compensate, Hume's equipment roster has been expanded. New gadgets include smoke bombs, which can blind enemies and kill smaller critters like spiders. But my favourite

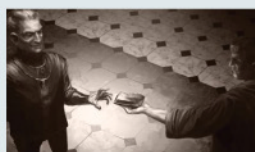


Expect a lot of perilous rooftop platforming a-la *Thief 2's* Life of the Party.



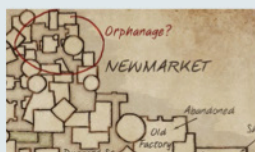
ABOVE AND BEYOND

Four features that make *The Black Parade* more than just a level pack



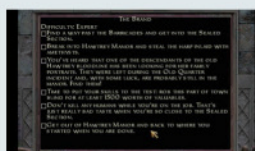
1 STORYTELLING

The mod features fully voiced and animated cutscenes that match the original game's style.



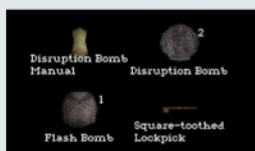
2 MAPS

Each mission gives you with a map which provides a mere sketch of the area you'll explore.



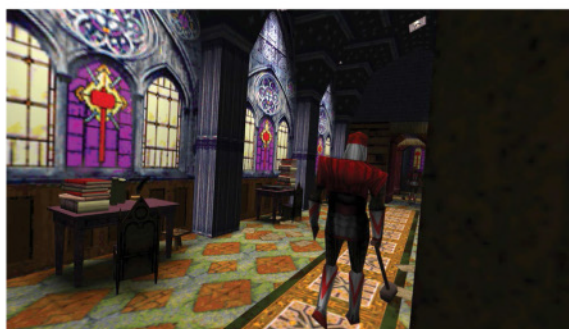
3 OBJECTIVES

Harder difficulties add extra objectives, forcing you to be more daring in your exploration.



4 EQUIPMENT

The mod adds several new items to your thievery toolkit, including the Disruption Bombs.



TOP: Videogames should bring back noisy floors.

ABOVE: The detailing in some areas is incredibly impressive.



new toy is the Disruption bomb. This temporarily disables electrical light sources, letting you slip through stubbornly illuminated areas.

INSIDE AT LAST

Of course, the main draw here is not new gadgets, but new levels. The first mission sees Hume treading a winding path to access a closed-off city district, helping himself to coins and jewels as if he's touring the supermarket samples. There's a huge gatehouse to climb, sewers to delve, tenements prowled by blackguards to rob, and a spooky factory to tread lightly through. It's a splendid reintroduction to the world of *Thief*.

The second mission, by comparison, is classic immersive sim showcase, as Hume's tasked with pilfering a precious vase from a lord with eclectic tastes in art. Starting off on the street, the lord's sprawling, Tudor-ish mansion can be infiltrated from multiple angles, ascended into through dank underground caverns, or accessed from above via an adjacent watchtower. Once inside, the estate's opulent rooms become increasingly weird and warped, as the lord's tastes are revealed to be more profane than initially imagined.

Although some levels are better than others (the third level, a raid on a Hammerite Cathedral, feels a little flat and boxy after the first two showstoppers) each is a delight to unpick. These are not spaces designed to be rushed through, but absorbed slowly, taken at a walking pace and mastered step-by-step. That isn't to say they are exceptionally difficult, although they are generally tougher than the official missions. Each area is heavily guarded and often well illuminated, meaning you must move cautiously and spend your resources wisely. The game will certainly stretch your skills on Expert difficulty, where additional objectives force you to investigate every nook and cranny.

A LONG WAY DOWN

Yet there's more to *The Black Parade* than good level design. The missions are as layered in worldbuilding as they are in geometry, littered with sublimely written notes, letters, and diaries. There's even a newspaper that fills you in on the city's various shocks and scandals, which includes chronicling your escapades as you venture deeper into the game.

Likewise, you'll eavesdrop on hushed conversations, guards griping about their duties, servants complaining about their masters. One particularly amusing exchange involves an acolyte being chastised for their improper rhetoric. Admittedly, some of the new voice acting isn't great. But some of it is excellent, near indistinguishable from the base games.

My favourite things about *The Black Parade*, however, is how hard it commits to the weirdness of *Thief's* fantasy setting. This means that, yes, there are missions which heavily feature the undead, such as Death's Dominion, in which Hume indulges in a spot of grave-robbing in a vast subterranean catacomb. But the entire campaign has a deeply unsettling undercurrent, depicting a society holding onto civilisation by its fingernails. Every corner of *The City*



EACH AREA IS HEAVILY GUARDED AND WELL ILLUMINATED

radiates bizarre noises, while maps are often fringed with strange supernatural elements, like disembodied voices, or statues that move around behind your back. It often feels like you're trespassing spiritually as well as physically, less like you're robbing a posh house, and more like you're breaching Tutankhamun's tomb. And when *The Black Parade* goes all in on the horror, well, let's just say there are fouler things than Haunts in the deep places of the world.

For a freely available passion project, it's an impressive work. My only complaint is that Hume too often feels like a cut-price Garrett. The way he's written and acted clearly aspires to Garrett's Marlowe-ish cool, but it invariably comes off as a cheap imitation. The mod would benefit from making Hume more of his own character, not least because it is so confident in its vision elsewhere. But that's an enormously petty grievance to have with a free mod this generous and detailed. *The Black Parade* is a darkly brilliant gem from one of PC gaming's most creative communities, and I urge you to slip it under your cloak. ■



TOP SECRETS IN

SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

Did you find all of these in Elden Ring's expansion? *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY

Hard

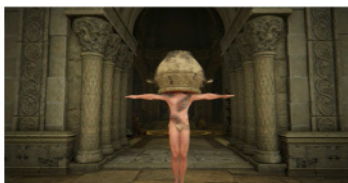
TIME

20 hours

VITAL LINKS

Scadutree Fragments:
pcgamer.com/games/rpg/elden-ring-scadutree-fragment-locations/

Revered Spirit Ashes:
pcgamer.com/games/rpg/elden-ring-revered-spirit-ash-locations/



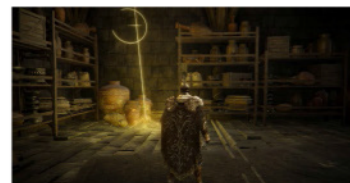
GREATJAR

1 One of the first secrets you can encounter in *Shadow of the Erdtree* is a gigantic jar helmet hidden in Belurat Gaol dungeon. Before you descend down to the final boss, look for a hanging pot lift you can drop onto and ride up to find the altar with the Greatjar.



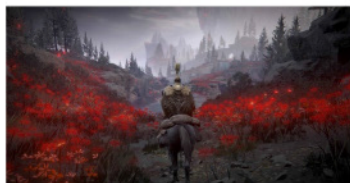
WELL DEPTHS KEY

2 While exploring Belurat, Tower Settlement you'll find this locked gate at the bottom of a well. Grab the key by dropping through a broken roof during the gravebird rooftop section. Unlocking the gate leads to a secret poison area with a mini-boss and a powerful talisman.



BELURAT CROSS

3 There's also a secret Miquella Cross inside Belurat, Tower Settlement. From the Stagefront site of grace, descend the staircase and drop down by the hanging Spider-Scorpion. Head outside and climb left over the rubble to find the set of rooms containing it.



CHARO'S HIDDEN GRAVE

4 You likely found the Jagged Peak area by completing the Dragon's Pit dungeon, but did you know there's another hidden within it? From the Grand Altar of Dragon Communion, travel behind the dragon corpse to find this red flower-filled region and a secret gaol.



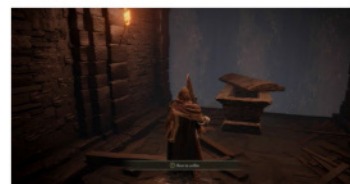
METEORIC ORE GREATSWORD

5 The true prize of the forge dungeons is the legendary Meteoric Ore Greatsword. You'll need to lower the gate at the end of the dungeon and pull a second lever before climbing on top of the rising gate to spot the weapon's location.



SCADUTREE AVATAR

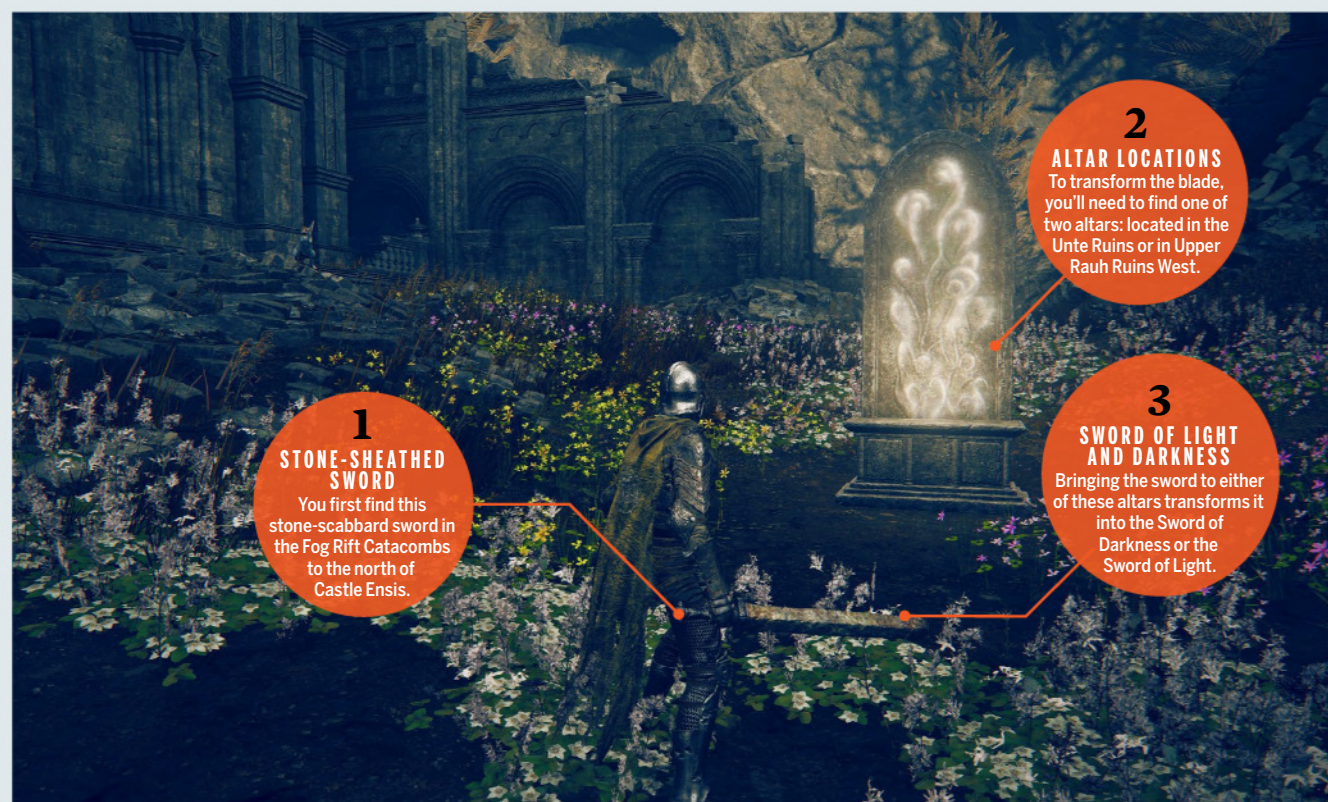
6 You'll need to lower the water in the Church District of the Shadow Keep and drop down to find an elevator leading to its arena. This shadow sunflower also gives you an important item you can use in the final boss fight.



THE ABYSSAL WOODS

7 When you arrive at the courtyard with the burning boats, climb down the ladder on its east side, head behind the waterfall and hit an illusory wall to find a coffin you can ride to Recluses' River. Follow the stream down and complete Darklight Catacombs to gain entry.

SWORD IN THE STONE *From blunt blade to legendary weapon*



1 STONE-SHEATHED SWORD

You first find this stone-scabbard sword in the Fog Rift Catacombs to the north of Castle Ensif.

2

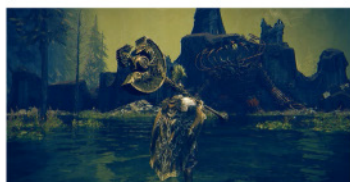
ALTAR LOCATIONS

To transform the blade, you'll need to find one of two altars: located in the Unte Ruins or in Upper Rauh Ruins West.

3

SWORD OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Bringing the sword to either of these altars transforms it into the Sword of Darkness or the Sword of Light.



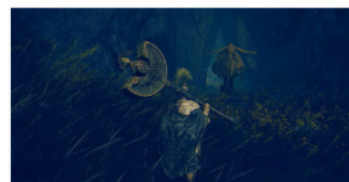
RUINS OF UNTE

8 Once you reach Recluses' River, you'll also find a sitting Furnace Golem blocking the entrance to the Ruins of Unte. Toss a Hefty Furnace Pot into its brazier and you can wake it up to gain access. You'll get the book to craft this pot from the Run-Down Traveler's Rest.



O MOTHER

9 This Marika statue hidden behind the Shadow Keep is a bit of a mystery, but you can get past it using the O Mother gesture. You'll find this on a corpse to the north of the Bonny Village in Scadu Altus. Use the gesture in front of the statue to unlock the Hinterlands area.



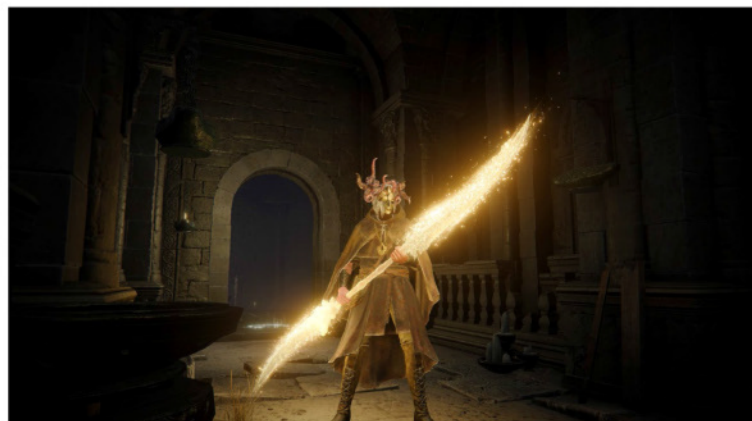
RAUH BASE

10 While you enter the Upper Rauh Ruins via the Shadow Keep, this lower section is accessible through a cave to the north of the Moorth Ruins in Scadu Altus. Travel through the cave and the small gravebird swamp just after to enter the region.



FINGER RUINS

11 If you find Count Ymir in the Cathedral of Manus Celes in east Scadu Altus, he tasks you with finding finger ruins scattered across the Land of Shadow. The first is in the Southern Shore region, while the second is in the Hinterland to the northeast.



EUPORIA

12 From Spiral Rise site of grace in Enir-Ilim, descend the stairs and jump off the right side to a staircase, before dropping down a series of ledges and jumping through a window. Follow the path back into Belurat where you'll find this weapon.



FALLOUT 4: LUCKY BASTARD

PART 1

Surviving the wasteland as its most fortunate, yet least deserving, human. *By Rick Lane*

Phil Icitous is a terrible person. An average-looking, mid-30s white male, Phil is ill-tempered, weak, stupid, lazy, myopic, chronically sarcastic and has as much talent as your average root vegetable. Yet he lives in a lovely house, is married to a lovelier wife, and has a robot butler who serves him breakfast.

This is because Phil is the luckiest man alive. While his SPECIAL traits all rank at an evenly underwhelming 3, that final L rings in at a dazzlingly fortuitous 10. He's the kind of man the who'd win the lottery, blow it all on bad crypto investments, then win the lottery again; who'd hold a management position in a major tech company despite lacking any of the skills or social graces required to do so.

But Phil is about to have his luck tested to the extreme, because the end of the world is coming, and the nukes are pointed right at his house.

Welcome, dear readers, to my latest harebrained scheme. I've been trying to think of a way to get the best roleplaying experience out of *Fallout 4*, which is generally regarded as the weakest mainline RPG in the series (though not necessarily the weakest game). Its roleplaying systems are more diluted than all prior *Fallout* games, making it more of a shooter with stat upgrades than post-apocalyptic DnD.

Yet *Fallout 4* does retain one of the series' most interesting quirks – simulated luck. While it's roleplaying options are limited, you can still build a character who relies on the roll of the dice to survive, coasting through life not by skill but a series of happy accidents. It also includes a feature previous *Fallout* games lack – Survival difficulty. This adds systems like hunger, thirst, fatigue and diseases into the game, while also disabling fast-travel and preventing you from saving your progress until you sleep in a bed. It aims to make exploring the wasteland more authentic, and is comfortably the harshest survival experience the series has to offer.

My plan is to smash together Phil's infuriating fortune and the brutal realities of the wasteland like uranium atoms in a nuclear bomb, in the hope it yields an explosion of shenanigans. Can civilisation's least-deserving man survive armageddon? Time to flip the coin.

BEGINNING OF THE END

Fallout 4 always starts the same way. The bombs fall onto the American dream, and Phil rushes to the safety of Vault 111 with his family, where they are all cryogenically frozen in another of Vault-Tec's ethically bankrupt human experiments. At some point Phil and his wife are defrosted so raiders can steal their baby son, during which his wife is shot dead. None of this might seem particularly lucky, but bear in mind that luck is relative, and Phil has just come through the apocalypse unscathed.

The raiders freeze Phil again, until the tank finally lets him out some 200 years after the end of the world, giving

CAN CIVILISATION'S LEAST-DESERVING MAN SURVIVE ARMAGEDDON?

me permanent control over the character. One tutorial sequence and several dead radroaches later, I exit the Vault to one of those splendid Bethesda reveals, then head down to my ruined house, where my robot butler (I can't be bothered to remember his name and Phil wouldn't either) fills me in on the end-times.

From this point, I'm free to do whatever I want. Naturally, the first thing I do is build a bed, because I need it to save my progress. This means grappling with my least favourite part of *Fallout 4*, the settlement-building system. I'm hoping Survival mode will frame the settlement system in a better light for me, but after five minutes of fiddly menu navigation, that hope has dimmed considerably. It's just such a faff to do anything, and I dread how much I'll need to use it.

Now saved, I trek to the Red Rocket truck stop and recruit Dogmeat. Given all my stats outside of Luck are, as a doctor would say, 'shit', I'm concerned about how squishy Phil will be in combat. Having Dogmeat around should result in a few enemies aiming at the Alsatian rather than me, which is, fittingly, the kind of scumbag reason Phil would keep a dog.

My fears quickly prove justified when a pack of

molerats emerges from the soil around me, and a few swipes from their raw pink paws put me on the verge of death. Recovering from this rodent rampage gives me a crash course in the perils of Survival mode. I use Stimpaks I swiped from Vault 111 to replenish my health, but using Stimpaks on Survival difficulty makes your character thirsty. I only have dirty water to slake my thirst, which sends my rad count shooting up. Using RadAway to mitigate the radiation makes me tired, so I build another bed to sleep it off. When I wake up, I'm hungry AND thirsty, and this time I have no water at all.

SELF HELP

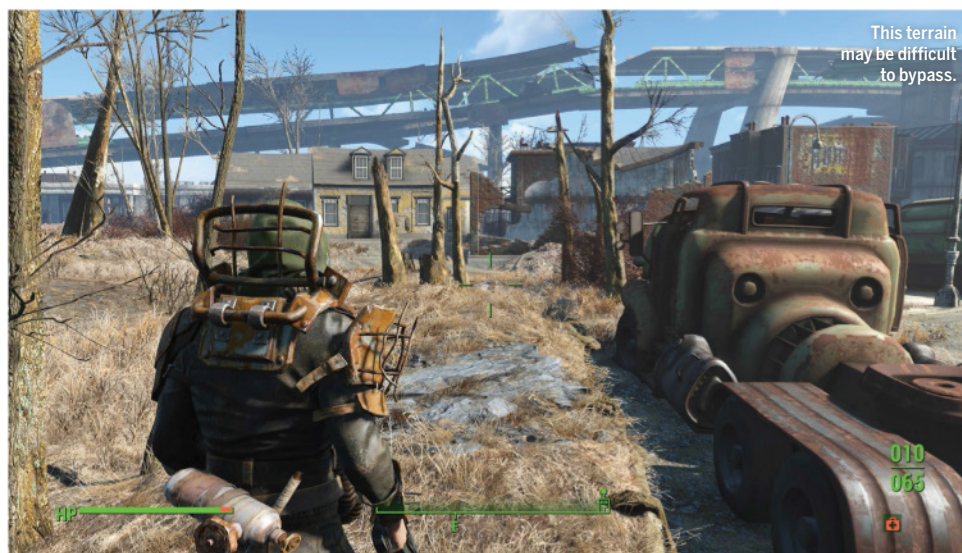
Now worse off than when I arrived at Red Rocket, I trudge down the hill to the town of Concord, where Preston

THE RULES

1. Survival mode: that means no quicksaves

2. Luck build: perks for more crits and items

3. 'Evil' choices: bad guys have more fun



» Garvey, last of the Minutemen, bravely fends off a pack of raiders from a balcony above the Museum of Freedom. I would leave him to his fate, but the raiders are also hostile to me, so I bravely shoot each of them in the back of the head while they use Garvey as target practice.

Garvey thanks me for my assistance, then asks me to help clear the raiders from inside the museum. Now, it's important for me to clarify Phil's moral stance here. While I'm qualifying this as an 'evil' run of *Fallout 4*, the game doesn't let you make a whole lot of truly 'evil' choices, certainly not in these early stages. Most of the time, the best you can muster is a small-minded, selfish asshole. I could just tell Garvey to get lost, but I also know that helping him will net me a set of T-47 power armour. That's the kind of kit a squishy, self-centred coward like Phil would happily kill a bunch of raiders for.

Clearing out said raiders is a... delicate process, with lots of peeping around corners praying I don't get shot. But eventually I reach the roof and nab the armour. This triggers a raider counterassault on the street below, easily mopped up using the armour's accompanying minigun. However, I'd forgotten that at the end of the assault, a Deathclaw appears, and I've more or less emptied the minigun firing at the raiders.

I daren't risk fighting the creature at street level, as one swipe of its claws could send me all the way back to the Red Rocket. Instead, I have to shoot at it with my pistol from the roof. I spend a good 20 minutes chipping away at its health bar from above, and even after this, it still has half its health left. Then, just as I'm worrying that I'll be stuck here forever, I'm saved not by luck, but by Bethesda jank. As it runs around the street, the Deathclaw gets stuck in the hole it emerged from, enabling me to get up close and finish the monster off with a shotgun.

Garvey thanks me again, and tells me he's heading to my old home to start a new settlement, and I'm welcome

A GUIDE TO GETTING LUCKY

Here's a quick rundown of the best perks in the luck tree



BLOODY MESS

Provides a damage boost and makes enemies explode. What's not to like?



RICOCET

Enemy bullets sometimes ping back and kill them. The chance gets higher as your health drops.



IDIOT SAVANT

A chance to gain exp with every action. The lower your intelligence, the higher the chance.



MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

Occasionally, when attacking in VATS, a fancy man will show up and kill an enemy.

to join him. "Yeah, whatever, see ya," is the essence of my reply. I'm more concerned with spending my newly acquired perk points from levelling up. As I have luck 10, I can pick from any of the Luck perks off the bat, so I opt for Bloody Mess which gives me a damage boost and Ricochet which provides a small chance for enemies to kill themselves with their own bullets.

The next destination for the main quest is Diamond City, but I want to explore the nearby area a bit first. A big satellite dish on the hill catches my eye, but first I take my power armour back to the Red Rocket, where I leave it until I can find some Fusion Cores to run it properly. While doing this, I'm temporarily waylaid by an infection from drinking dirty puddle water.

SATELLITE PAIN

Eventually, I break the cycle of thirst and illness by discovering you can build pumps to access clean water, and you can loot empty bottles and fill them from the pump. Ready and recovered, I head up to the satellite dish, where I make three more exciting discoveries: the dish is crawling with raiders, luck does not protect me from dog bites and luck definitely does not protect me from exploding mines.

It takes me several runs from the Red Rocket to clear the dish exterior. My character can manage well enough in a firefight, but the moment a melee or explosive attack comes my way, it's immediate game over. Finally though, I succeed in eliminating the raider scum. I then steal all their armour, hoping it'll protect me from sudden instadeath. This is less than ideal, as armour is heavy and my puny character can't carry much. But if I'm killed every time I get punched, I'm never going to get anywhere.

I then decide to check out the interior of the facility in the hope of finding some better equipment. What I find instead is a laser trap, which Dogmeat casually wanders into and blows both of us back to the Red Rocket. Smiling to conceal my rage, I walk back to the dish again, kill the raiders again and steal their armour

BELOW: SNOOKER IS BETTER THAN POOL.





HE CROUCHES DOWN, TAKES AIM... AND SHOOTS HIMSELF SQUARELY IN THE HEAD

again. This time though, I spot a dirty mattress I can sleep on to save my progress. Right now, I'm feeling about as lucky as a no-leaf clover.

Inside the facility, I bypass the laser trap and explore. There are even more raiders down here than on the surface, but the narrow corridors, combined with my big shotgun, make it easier to deal with them. I even manage to kill a cluster of raiders, but I notice too late that the last surviving raider has flanked me on the right. He crouches down, takes aim... and shoots himself squarely in the head. Finally! A true bit of fake luck. Perhaps there's hope for this playthrough after all.

POWER CUT

The facility is filled with plenty of useful items, but nothing that radically improves my prospects. At this point, it's clear I'm not getting to Diamond City until I've levelled up a bit, so I reluctantly trudge back to Sanctuary to see if Preston Garvey has any work for me. He sends me to a settlement on the far side of the satellite dish, who in turn ask me to clear yet more raiders from a power plant to the South. I scoff at the

prospect. Even if I was inclined to help you losers, there's no way I can fight that many raiders and survive!

But then, fortune favours me again, as I explore a scrapheap for old robots and find a fully charged Fusion Core. With this, I stand a chance of clearing the power station. I head back to the Red Rocket, plug in the new core into my armour, and begin the long stomp south.

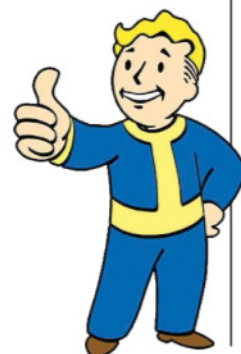
The exterior of the plant is bristling with raiders, but I find a drainage duct to the rear of the plant large enough for me to 'sneak' into. Inside the plant's narrow corridors, the raiders stand little chance against my armour. Nonetheless, clearing them out is a grind. By the time I splatter the raider leader's brains with buckshot, the power armour is verging on becoming regular armour. I loot what I can carry and rush for the nearest exit, but this leads out into the main courtyard filled with the

raiders I initially avoided. Cue another intense battle as I try to snipe raiders perched on the rooftops.

The moment the lead stops flying, I try to get back to the Red Rocket with the power armour. But I only make it to a place called the Starlight Drive In before the juice runs out. Fortunately, I can make a camp at the Drive In and save my progress.

It's been a rough road to get this far, but I feel like fortune is beginning to turn in my favour. I've got a few more levels under my belt now, and can grab a couple more perks. The Next Stop is Diamond City, and from now on, I'll have a Mysterious Stranger watching my back... ■

ABOVE: Good thing this guy's on my side, else I'd be extremely dead.





WHY I LOVE

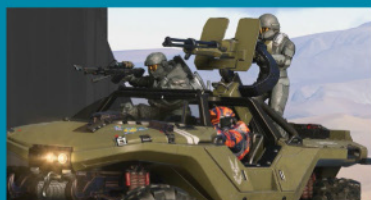
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



BEING THE WHEELMAN IN

MULTIPLAYER SHOOTERS

Letting the others have the bang bang fun. *By Morgan Park*



LEFT: Players rush to the gun on the back of Halo's Warthog...



RIGHT: But the driver's seat is the place to be for the most fun.



Years of bouncing between multiplayer shooters has taught me something important about myself: there's nothing better than playing the support role. This crystallised for me after years of maiming healers in *Overwatch*, though I submit that there exists a higher tier of FPS support players. These elite, uncelebrated helpers can't directly heal you, nor do they meaningfully add to the kill count, but they will save your life every chance they get while their largest contributions go uncredited. They are, of course, the drivers.

I wasn't always a driver. In *Halo 3*, I'd hop straight into the Warthog turret and wait for some other poor sap to take the wheel. I'd stand idly by an empty *Battlefield* Humvee until I could be the second person to mount up, ensuring I get the gunner spot. Why shouldn't I insist? I was playing shooters to shoot, after all, not to drive around and hope I don't get rocketed in the windshield. The gunner got to have all the fun, all the kills, all the glory.

Call it growing up, but I couldn't feel more opposite to this now. Gunning is fun, but drivers are the true playmakers of *Battlefield*'s huge Conquest maps and *Halo*'s Big Team Battles. We all know what a bad driver looks like. The early days of any large-scale shooter are filled with bold, misguided chauffeurs who gun it headfirst into a landmine or a tank's gun barrel. Widely shared clips of under-qualified wheelmen steering teammates toward destruction have made it an uphill climb for driving feats to be properly recognised.

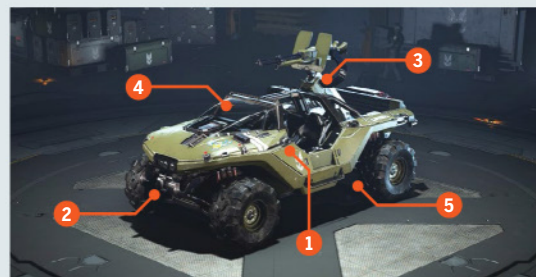
Good driving starts with map knowledge. You have to know where you're going at all times, and crucially, which routes to pivot to when the situation goes sour. But memorising maps won't get you far

DRIVING SCHOOL

The anatomy of a Halo Warthog

1 DRIVER'S SEAT
Without it, it's just a fancy paper weight.

2 WINCH
Absolutely useless cosmetic flair.



3 TURRET
An automatic high-calibre turret that rips apart Spartans and aliens alike, but leaves the operator vulnerable.

4 SHOTGUN
A spot for a second gun with a limited field of view. Usually offers moral support, or carries the flag.

5 TYRES
These babies can and will pop in *Infinite*. The Warthog can still drive on its rims, but it's best not to.

without a fine-tuned danger sense. This, I think, is the secret sauce for great driving – to understand the flow of a match so well that you can predict where tanks are setting up camp, surprise entire squads, or avoid common spots where rocket snipers like to set up. *Battlefield* drivers, with its wide open maps and particularly

for videogame drivers. It's deadly, surprisingly quick, and handles like a four-wheeled rhinoceros that can invert at any moment. *Halo Infinite*'s Warthog is much snappier to control than the ones I started out with, but it's more of a glass cannon than ever, too. A rocket, plasma 'nade, or guy with a grapple hook can ruin a run, so managing distance is important.

It really sucks to let down my gunner when I can't drive them out of harm's way in time, flip the car, or get exploded by a tank I should've spotted. Angry chat messages and passive aggressive friendly fire are occupational hazards, but when it's going well, Warthog driving is genuinely the best thrill I've ever had in *Halo*. It's incredible how much damage one car can deal.

Being a cabbie of destruction is satisfying enough, don't get me wrong, but it's surprising that drivers are still undervalued in our modern era of obsessive stat tracking. The current incarnations of *Halo* and *Battlefield* do award drivers with 'driver assists' when their gunners score kills, but those assists aren't weighted evenly against top-level stats like kills and deaths. If you ask me, when a helicopter pilot or jeep driver has four kills, maybe ten deaths, but an unbelievable 47 assists, that person is the MVP.

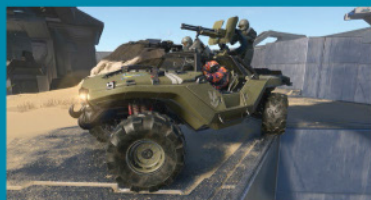
I suppose I should just be thankful that there are still shooters out there large enough to need a ride. You can chart the decline of vehicles in shooters alongside the explosion of 5v5 competitive FPSes in the 2010s. Helicopters, tanks, and jeeps got edged out of an era that was trending toward narrow maps and balance-obsessed game design. Outside *Halo*, *Battlefield* and *Squad*, the only subgenre left for grease monkeys is battle royale. A new generation of shooter fans are earning their permits behind the wheels of *Fortnite* Behemoths and *Warzone* helicopters. Bless them for that. ■

WARTHOG DRIVING IS GENUINELY THE BEST THRILL I'VE EVER HAD IN HALO

fragile four-person cars, are particularly good survivalists.

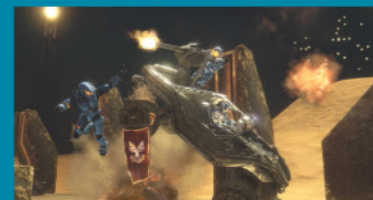
WARTHOG SKILLS

I've been working on my Warthog skills in *Halo Infinite* the last few months and it's like I've unlocked a whole different layer of the game that plays like expert-level hide and seek. The Warthog is a perfect litmus test



LEFT: A rare shot of a Warthog that's not upside down.

RIGHT: The Warthog has been a *Halo* staple since its starring role in the first game, all the way back in 2001.



A full-page background image showing a character with blue face paint and a fur collar, kneeling in a dark, rocky, and bloody environment. The character is holding a severed head in their hands. A sword lies on the ground nearby. The scene is dimly lit, with rain or water visible in the air.

The decision to revisit the 2017
action-adventure became a no-brainer

Chirophobia is the fear of hands and if you didn't have it before, you will now.



HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

Ninja Theory blurred the lines between indie and triple-A. *By Matt Poskitt*

Senua is unlike any other character I've come across in videogames. This remains to this day, seven years after Ninja Theory introduced the world to *Hellblade*. It's a story of grief, trauma, love, revenge, anger and acceptance all wrapped up in a solid six-to-eight-hour experience that offers more substance than many do in hundreds. And all this from a team of approximately 20 people.

Set in the 8th century, we begin with the titular Pict warrior making her way to the secret entrance of Hellheim in hopes of saving the soul of her dead lover, Dillion. It's atmospheric, creepy and undeniably cinematic. It's hard not to think of an indie arthouse movie as Senua rows through the murky waters and

the opening credits descend from the engulfing fog. The voices then begin to seep in.

"Go back. It's not safe." "Turn around." "She's afraid. Wouldn't you be?" The constant chattering is a form of psychosis which Senua suffers from and, rightly, was heralded for its accurate depiction. Known as Furies, these voices fuel the darkness in her mind and are further illustrated via puzzles, melee combat and hallucinations. For instance, the more enemies encountered at one time represent Senua being mentally overwhelmed. There are lots of clever design elements like this that are easily overlooked on a first playthrough. So with its sequel, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*, now available on PC and Xbox Series X/S, the decision to revisit the 2017 action-adventure became a no-brainer.

PERMADEATH

Upon release, I went into *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* relatively blind, being intrigued by its 'independent triple-A' marketing as well as the furore surrounding its 'permadeath' mechanic. Within the first 30 minutes, a message states, "The dark rot will grow each time you fail. If the rot reaches Senua's head, her quest is over. And all progress will be lost." This generated quite an uproar as the game community debated the decision to wipe a player's saves once a certain number of deaths had been reached. Quickly though, it was discovered to be a bluff. And a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August, 2017

DEVELOPER
Ninja Theory

PUBLISHER
Ninja Theory

LINK
ninjatheory.com



A few rough edges now show, despite the game's prevailing beauty.



» magnificent one at that. I wish more studios took big swings like the threat of permadeath. Sure, some people felt misled, but I felt the intention of creating the same sort of dread that its protagonist suffers was masterfully implemented this way. It certainly impacted my first time, even if my most recent playthrough lost a bit of its edge. When I believed permadeath was real, I could only muster up a couple of hours of playthrough before needing a break. Now knowing it doesn't exist, I felt more confident in battles, able to blast through them

without concern for my progress. That, nevertheless, doesn't take away from the relentless nature of the voices. Using binaural audio, *Hellblade* is most effective with earphones, recreating the idea of someone speaking into your ears up close or from afar. Upon a recent visit to *Ninja Theory* in the run-up to *Hellblade II*, I was able to see this impressive technology in person, watching as the actors who vocalise the Furies speak into a head-shaped microphone to create the effect. It was just as chilling then as it is now,

being fundamental to how psychosis is executed in-game.

To ensure these symptoms were represented as close to real life as possible, the studio employed a mental health advisor, Cambridge University professor of neuroscience Paul Fletcher. "The element of psychosis is a part of her, but it's not just a checklist of symptoms that we sprinkle on to make her and the story more interesting, it's actually a deep experience of constructed reality and how that shapes what she does in her quest and so forth," he explains.

Looking back now, Fletcher believes the game succeeded in its efforts: "I thought it did some really powerful things in representing the clinical realities that I'd experienced from years of talking to people with psychosis. More important than that, the feedback that I've got from people with psychosis is that it is an accurate representation." It's hard not to agree considering the number of awards that *Hellblade* picked up: winner of Games For Impact, Best Audio and Game Beyond Entertainment, to name a few.

Psychosis feeds into how all of the puzzles are handled. The majority of them revolve around glyph symbols with the aim being to match three

HELLS'S BELLS

Hellblade's unexpected success caught the eye of Microsoft



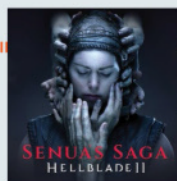
HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE 2017

The breakout hit first made its way to PC and PS4, shifting one million copies.



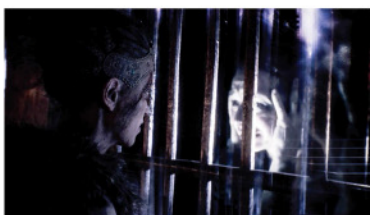
MICROSOFT 2018

Following the success of *Senua's Sacrifice*, Microsoft picks up *Ninja Theory* for \$117 million.



SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II 2024

Expanding the team to 100, the sequel becomes a PC and Xbox exclusive.

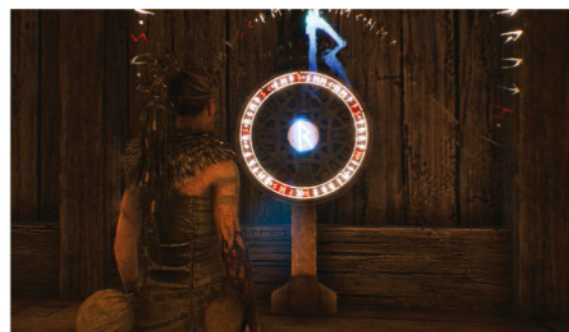


ABOVE: The new McSpicy really has a kick.

RIGHT: Vertigo, another common fear, to check off your bingo sheet.



While simple, the combat system is satisfying.



symbols in the nearby environment. During all this, the voices will both help and hinder. "You're so close," one says. "Just give up," says another. That push-and-pull dynamic does play on your thought process for figuring these things out. At one point a voice congratulates me on solving the puzzle, only to take it back seconds later. It's frustrating but damn, I love it.

What I don't love is how hand-holding spotting the symbols can be. A quick scan of your surroundings and often the camera will zoom in and complete the mystery without much input from my side. This has been a problem with modern Sony titles as of late – think *God of War Ragnarok* and *Horizon Forbidden West*. If you set me a puzzle, please just leave me in peace to solve it. If I need help, I'll look to the web. That's why guide writers were invented.

Combat is another aspect; straightforward yet a struggle both mentally and physically for Senua. The basis of it is attacking, dodging or moving and parrying. There's little else aside from a mirror charge that will slow down enemies, allowing a flurry of fast moves that can take out multiple enemies at will. I like how the voices will warn

IF YOU SET ME A PUZZLE, PLEASE JUST LEAVE ME IN PEACE TO SOLVE IT

when an attack from behind is incoming, though. None of this is especially bad but there's definitely room for improvement with the emotion of its lead elevating its weaker aspects.

MOTION CAPTURE

Melina Juergens, who did the motion capture and voice work for Senua, manages to blend into the work so seamlessly. It's no wonder she took home the top acting nod from BAFTA. What's more miraculous is that she had no professional training in the field before being cast. Originally starting as a video editor at the company, Juergens cut trailers for *DmC: Devil May Cry* and *Hellblade* – at the time, she stood in for Senua during early tech experiments. Seeing the potential, she was offered the role.

Going from behind the camera to in front is a big ask, but everything about the performance is striking, conveying the necessary emotions to

let us into the character's mind like few others do. There's a genuine vulnerability with Melina admitting that she had to push out of her comfort zone to play the part, facing her fears just like Senua. Whether it's fighting the god of fire, Surtr, or deciphering the tricks of Valravnn, the god of illusion, the character is constantly caught between being unsure of her actions and yet determined to see them through to save her love. I'm not sure if that realism can be captured by a trained professional as opposed to someone thrown into the space for the first time. A sink or swim situation.

One scene late on sees the skull of Dillion lost, and it appears as if all walls are closing in on Senua. She's failed her mission. The darkness is enclosing. Hunched over in a fetal position, Senua addresses the camera directly. Reflecting on her childhood, we get a fantastic monologue (one of many) that is delivered in one single long take. It's then for the first time that the Furies are blocked out momentarily and the words uttered, "I'm not going to give up". This is just one small scene but honestly, any can be broken out and pointed to as to why Melina cleaned up at every awards show. ■



JOSHUA WOLENS



You might look at my game choices and think I'm trapped in 2005, but I look at you and think you're trapped in 2024. Who's better off?

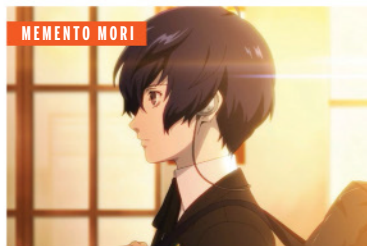


GO IN NAKED

METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

konami.com

→ Who needs remakes? Certainly not Big Boss. It's a lacklustre port, but the best game in the *Metal Gear* series still shines, especially on Steam Deck. The tale of a young Snake on a mission to assassinate his mentor, it's the simplest story Kojima's ever told, and the strongest.



MEMENTO MORI

PERSONA 3 RELOAD

persona.atlusc.com/p3r

→ You can tell how much the *Persona* series has infected my brain with one anecdote: when I wrapped up *Persona 3 Reload* after a mere 80 hours I thought to myself, "Huh, that was quick." Would I do it all again? You bet. No one does magical Japanese high school like Atlus.



YOU BETTER DELTA

CYBERPUNK 2077

cyberpunk.net

→ Not touching *Cyberpunk* until it got its 2.0 patch is the best gaming decision I ever made. Today, the game is an incredible, deep RPG with one of the best expansions I've ever seen, a far cry from its legendarily disastrous launch. Go Netrunner and don't look back.



DIE, AGAIN

ELDEN RING

eldenring.com

→ I've beaten every Soulslike FromSoft has ever put out, but I never got around to *Elden Ring*. With *Erdtree's* release, I've decided to rectify it. And what do you know? The game is amazing, and features the studio's lushest, most mournful and most hostile world yet.

MUST



PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

by Joshua Wolens

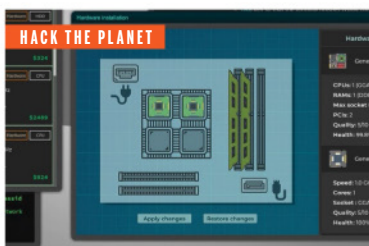


DROP A BOMBSHELL

FALLOUT 1

fallout.bethesda.net

→ Don't tell anyone I told you, but this is actually the best *Fallout* game. With its tight focus, pulp vibes and relative lack of the pop-culture references that dominated its sequel, only *New Vegas* has ever come close to surpassing it. And it's way before anyone thought up Preston Garvey.



HACK THE PLANET

GREY HACK

greyhackgame.com

→ I've spent my whole life trying to find a game that one-ups *Uplink*, Introversion's peerless hacking sim. *Grey Hack*, an Early Access MMO hacking sim that demands you actually learn computers, might just do it. That's if I can figure out how to work the terminal.



MAKE YOUR MILLIONS

STONKS-9800

ternoxgames.com

→ This '80s Japan-themed stock trading sim, and my game of the year for 2023, just keeps getting better as the updates come in. The most recent one? The ability to manage, merge, and bankrupt whole companies. Live your Lehman Brothers dreams, my friends.



MAKE A SANDWICH

RESIDENT EVIL 1 (1996)

game.capcom.com/residentevil

→ Freshly released from physical-only captivity by GOG, *Resident Evil 1* has returned in its blocky, non-remake form. You know what I say to that? Hell yeah. The more golden oldies that are easily accessible, the better, and it doesn't get much more golden than *RE1*.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE LAST GOOD KILLSTREAK [PART 1]**

When I finally caught up with Peter Molyneux, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Dogulus Rift in a ramshackle pub just outside of Guildford, Surry, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon. Molyneux hadn't been seen in the PC gaming community for years and, finally, I'd been approached by the PC Gamer Council to track the guy down. Molyneux, like Dogulus, wasn't in a great shape though. "Come on, Peter," I said, carrying him slumped on my shoulder toward the door, "it's time to get back in the saddle, you've been missed."

Molyneux stashed in back of my station wagon out front, rambling about AI and Kinect, I took a moment and lit a cigarette. It was then, though, the pub's owner, a Southern gal called Rosie, approached me. "You're Dick Ray-Tracing, right? Oh, Dick, you've got to help me. My daughter, Betty Sue, who was a huge PC gamer, disappeared ten years ago, and you're my last shot at finding her. The police tell me they consider her now dead, but I can't believe that, she's out there, Dick, I know it." She handed me a picture of Betty Sue, all blond curls and youthful hope. Was it because she reminded me of my first love that I took the gig? To this day I don't know.

Three weeks later I found myself a hunted man in Soho, London, my .38 Special revolver in hand and beads of sweat creeping down my forehead. My hunt for Betty Sue had led me into the seediest underbelly of the big smoke, and as I raced past knocking shops, opium dens and crypto exchanges, I knew it was only going to get worse. This was console gamer territory, and the Console Gamer Collective assassins had me cornered.

Ducking into a long-abandoned Sega warehouse, unsold Dreamcast boxes piled high, I waited for them to come. The .38 Special bullet ripped through their pointman's throat at the entrance, spinning him violently back and through the filthy window pane onto the road. Under a barrage of return fire I slid through dirt and detritus to take cover behind a concrete pillar. Calming my frantic breathing, I feigned one way to fire, then rattled off two shots in quick succession the other way. The second burst through the skull of an operative. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Before I could relocate, though, the third CGC goon caught me in the shoulder. My vision jarred and I scrambled backwards, firing wildly, to take cover behind a derelict workbench. Placing my gun on the bench top, scanning for the assailant, it was then, though, that the knife slipped in my side and a soft voice whisper in my ear, "Oh Dick, you are not a good person. You know that, right? Good people don't end up here." It was Betty Sue.

TO BE CONTINUED...

...UNTIL SEP 12

AORUS



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PC GAMER
T100P
2024



Welcome

There are 103,744 games on Steam. Of those, 14,499 were released in 2023 alone. And that's to say nothing of the many, many PC games that haven't made it to Valve's digital storefront.

All of which is to say: it never gets any easier. More games arrive every year, but now, as when we started our annual list of the best PC games, we only have 100 spaces available for them.

Does that make the Top 100 pure folly? Maybe. But it's our folly, one that we use to celebrate the vibrancy and creativity of the medium. And hey, at least the list was easier to make this year than it will be in 2025.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
UK EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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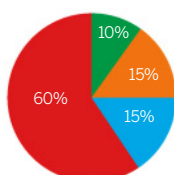
OUR VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Around 30 of PC Gamer's editors, writers and other staff were invited to rate games based on four categories we deem most important to earn a place in the Top 100. We want to recognise historical importance, how well it plays today, and also to give space for the newer games we can't put down. Most importantly, though, we need to really love each game we pick.

1 PC Gamer's writers vote for their favourite games across four categories.

2 The total score for each category is divided by the number of people who voted, to create an average score.

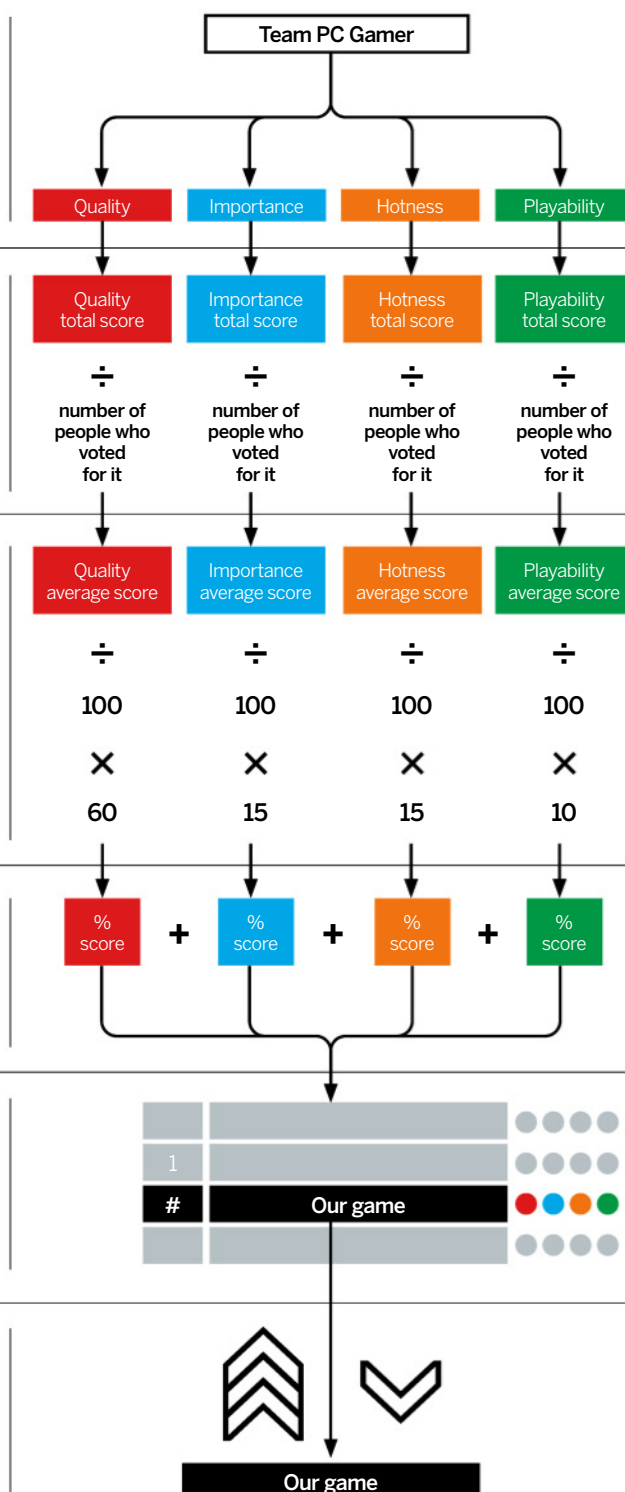
3 The four averages are split according to our special weighting.



4 The scores are then combined into an official Top 100 score, using maths and secrets.

5 The final scores are put in order to give us our provisional top 100 games list.

6 Writers can then demote or promote one game each, using arguments and democracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Jacob
Ridley



SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

I've noticed a distinct lack of rhythm games in this year's Top 100, and yet it's been a year when a truly fantastic rhythm game has left a lasting impression on me. Few games meld music, art style and good vibes as well as *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. I play it almost religiously every time I take a long-haul flight somewhere, and it never fails to bring a smile to my face.

PERSONAL PICK

Harvey
Randall



HADES 2

Is this cheating? Yes, but I put a very tasteful PowerPoint presentation together to get votes for this thing and I'll be damned if I let that go to waste. *Hades 2* is already bigger than the first game, somehow, and its music is even better than the first, impossibly. I also adore Melinoë to death. She's the workaholic to Zag's slacker, and I'm super invested in seeing her let her hair down.

100

VALHEIM

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 213.85 | PROMOTED BY Jacob Ridley

Quality 7.44

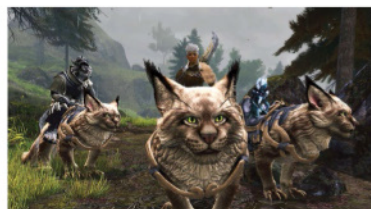
Importance 7.00

Hotness 5.75

Playability 7.53

Sarah James: *Valheim* is still brilliant. It's survival without the endless stress of managing resources. It can be as relaxing or as difficult as you want it to be, and is a game I regularly return to if I want to unwind.

Jacob Ridley: There have been a good few additions to the game since 2021, including the Mistlands, where I've died a lot. Most of all I'm enjoying visiting towns I built with friends years ago – returning to make it all so much better.



99

GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 214.10

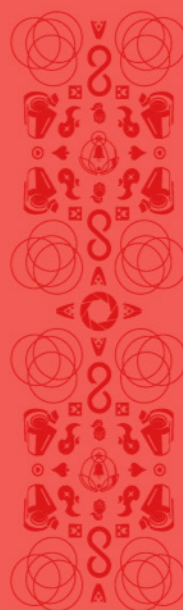
Phil Savage: It's been 12 years, and *Guild Wars 2* is still a quietly revolutionary vision of what an MMO can be. There's no subscription, no FOMO-inducing scarcity, no penalty for taking an extended break. Everything it adds remains relevant, every new expansion simply adds more, and now ArenaNet is making a new one every year.

98

CITY OF HEROES: HOMECOMING

RELEASED 204 | TOP 100 SCORE 216.15

Harvey Randall: After the saga *City of Heroes* has been through, ending in a legitimate private server with an official thumbs-up from NCSoft, this is a very special MMO. I'm still best mates with a lot of the people I met there, and *Homecoming* has received enough updates that I wholeheartedly recommend revisiting it for more than nostalgia's sake.





97

DAVE THE DIVER

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 217.19 | PROMOTED BY Chris Livingston

Quality 7.36 Importance 6.64 Hotness 6.69 Playability 8.25

Robin Valentine: There's a real joy of discovery in *Dave the Diver*. Every step you take, some new system opens up to you – what makes the game special is that it's always revealing itself to be bigger than you thought it was.

The game's other great stroke of genius is centring that experience on Dave, an immediately lovable character and a guy who feels like he's just as vaguely bemused by all this weirdness as you are.



96 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.68

Jody Macgregor: *Bloodlines* launched in such a state some people who played it then still have trauma. I took years to get around to it, after the unofficial patch, and it immediately went on my all-time list. Each vampiric bloodline feels completely different, whether you're a smooth-talking debauchee, goth wizard, or crazed visionary.

Joshua Wolens: It's got to be fate that *Bloodlines* and *KotOR 2* ended up next to each other. Proof that it doesn't matter if your game is practically falling apart: you can't hide greatness.

Andy Chalk: I've been through *Bloodlines* twice, and in many ways the second time was better than the first.



95 STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.13

Wes Fenlon: Dril was talking about *KotOR 2* when he tweeted "the wise man bowed his head solemnly and spoke: 'theres actually zero difference between good & bad things. you imbecile. You fucking moron'" (I still love it, though).

Joshua Wolens: People poke fun at its sermonising, but it's still the smartest Star Wars game out there.

94

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.30

Quality 7.87

Importance 7.80

Hotness 5.73

Playability 5.93

Harvey Randall: Every single companion character in *Dragon Age: Origins* is a complete home run – a feat that BioWare hasn't quite pulled off since. Also you get a dog that can tank for you. What's not to love?

Robin Valentine: *Origins* was such a watershed moment for the genre, combining the glossy, cinematic feel of big-budget action games with an unapologetically deep and expansive RPG experience. You don't get to *Baldur's Gate 3* without this game laying the groundwork.

And I genuinely think it's still the best one in the series to go back to – a rich and mature adventure, confident in its world-building and its old-school mechanics.



93

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.63

Harvey Randall: You know a game's good when it basically invents a whole genre. *L4D2* is the cell culture stuff that other bangers like *Vermintide 2* and *Darktide 2* grew out of.

Phil Savage: This got the highest Importance score of any game in the bottom 30 of the list. I'm unlikely to play it today over something like *Vermintide 2*, but it's one of the best four-player co-op shooters around.

Rich Stanton: I don't think gaming has ever improved upon smacking a zombie in the face with a giant skillet. For all its subsequent imitators, I don't think any has quite recaptured that mix of panic, hilarity, balls-to-the-wall holdouts, and the satisfaction of making it through as a team.

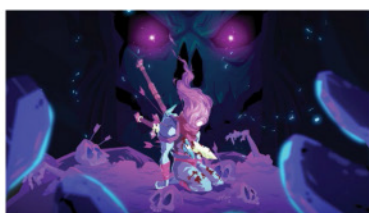


92

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.76

Nick Evanson: A perfect example of something that doesn't really bring anything new to the table, but what it does offer is a moving story, told through finely crafted gameplay, and replete with sumptuous scenery and vistas. The fact it runs so smoothly on all kinds of gaming PCs is no trivial matter either, especially after so many other disappointing PC ports.



91 DEAD CELLS

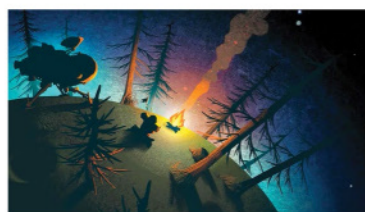
RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.85

Rich Stanton: A great roguelike at launch, but the way it was built upon has made it an all-timer. Best of all was how the game subtly changed over time, increasingly focusing on the bizarre and wonderful combinations of weapons and perks you could obtain on each run and, no matter how OP you manage to get, almost always killing you anyway.

90 OUTER WILDS

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.02

Robin Valentine: I'm not sure any game has nailed exploration to the degree that *Outer Wilds* has. Its solar system is a little clockwork diorama, stuck in a 22-minute time loop – and yet within that tiny sandbox the feeling of discovery is so big and so rich. Every expedition you're learning and piecing together how things work, or you're dying in ridiculous ways.



88 PENTIMENT

TOP 100 SCORE 222.30

Andy Chalk: *Pentiment* starts at a slow burn, but that's what sets the hook: out of nowhere, I was suddenly immersed in a world filled with living, breathing people whose names I knew and lives I cared about. I tried so hard to do the right thing. And in the end, that's all I can say – I tried.

87 THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

TOP 100 SCORE 222.36

Robin Valentine: The only things more fascinating than *Golden Idol*'s intricate mysteries are the grotesque, gurning faces of its cast. A twisting, complex, and fascinating story of murder, magic, and authoritarianism, told in a truly unique way that compels you to pore over its details.

86 ULTRAKILL

TOP 100 SCORE 222.90

Ted Litchfield: We're still waiting for the third and final episode, but *Ultrakill* is already an absolute heater in Early Access: An absurdist retelling of Dante's *Inferno* in which you play a blood-powered omniscient robot invading hell in search for fuel. It plays like *Doom Eternal* running at 1.5x speed.



89

DEATH STRANDING

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.09

Quality 7.92 Importance 6.79 Hotness 5.50 Playability 8.10

Rich Stanton: *Death Stranding* is 100% a vibes game. Though I watched the cutscenes my first time through, and am always interested in teasing out Kojima's themes, this is an experience that (like hill-walking itself) needs a certain mindset. It's a game I've been through twice and is now one I return to just to be in that zone again for a couple of hours, totally relaxed as I plan out my route, long past the stage of caring about timings or grades or even BTs.

The days of being a hero delivery

man are over: now I'm just Sam, out for a walk with BB and the camera, luxuriating in a virtual world that feels made for contemplation. The great poet William Wordsworth once said he composed while walking, that steady pace its own rhythm for the mind, and in *Death Stranding* at its best you know how he felt. I'm not sure whether Kojima Productions set out to make a zen simulator but, after living with this game for years, that's somehow where I've ended up with it.

T100P
2024

85

DESTINY 2

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.91

Quality 7.24

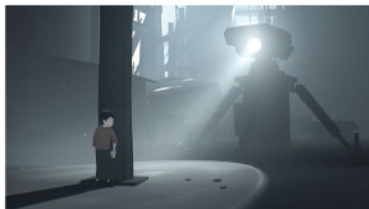
Importance 7.67

Hotness 7.79

Playability 7.71

Jacob Ridley: I mean we're all still playing it, right?
Tim Clark: Yes Jacob, yes we are. If you'd asked me this time last year whether Bungie had any realistic prospect of sticking the landing with *The Final Shape*, I wouldn't have been taken any bets. But the landing was very much stuck. The new subclass is an all you can eat buffet, the story actually got tied off satisfactorily, and there were some genuine emotional beats landed. Briefly, the community was even... happy.

Phil Savage: *Destiny 2* has had plenty of ups and downs, but right now, thanks to *The Final Shape*, it's absolutely worth playing.



84 INSIDE

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.98

Robin Valentine: Maybe still the best ending in videogames, right?

Rich Stanton: A flawless gem. *Inside* is supremely clever, but what sticks with you is how the facility slowly unfolds itself, the looming horror on all sides, and the awful question of just who you are: and what you're doing here.

Sean Martin: I just wish there was more news on Playdead's next game.



83 SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.06

Nick Evanson: Sure, *Civ VI* is OK and *Civ IV* is very good, but number five is perfection and probably the only 'real' *Civilization* game that matters. It almost certainly defines the phrase 'just one more turn'. Even the DLCs are great, especially *Brave New World*, and how many games can say that? If I was going to be stuck on a desert island for the rest of my life and could only take one game with me, it'd be *Civ V*.

Phil Savage: If you're new to the series, *Civ VI* is probably the one to play – especially following its many updates and DLCs. But I have more personal affection for *Civ V*, and many, many more nights lost to its compelling 4X loop.



82

HOTLINE MIAMI

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.29

Quality 8.07 Importance 8.00 Hotness 4.00 Playability 8.00

Jake Tucker: Ostensibly a combat title, *Hotline Miami* is really a puzzle game about how you can better murder an army of criminals in tightly designed levels. The throbbing soundtrack, endless parade of white-suited

mobsters and vicious ultraviolence combine to create a flow-state fever dream. Stacks of indie games have tried to emulate the split-second brutality of *Hotline Miami*, but nobody does it better than Dennaton Games.



PERSONAL PICK

Jake Tucker



ARMA 3

Arma 3 is an all-timer if you're willing to weigh your PC down with a terabyte of mods and embrace the soldier fantasy. A clunky military sandbox that is kept alive by hundreds of modders making content, *Arma 3* works best when you grab your Teamspeak brothers-in-arms and go on a little hike with guns, calling in your friends with the attack chopper when things get rough.

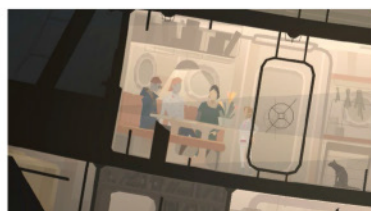
PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

I threw the Top 100 into chaos by nominating this innovative Nintendo classic, which highlights the intricate schedules of a townful of NPCs living a three-day time loop. *Majora's* great, but more importantly, it's now playable at 4K, 60fps on PC thanks to a (legal!) port that dynamically recompiles the N64 code. The harbinger of more amazing fan-made ports to come!



81 KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

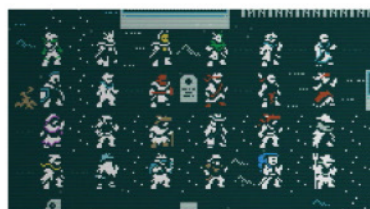
RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.50

Andy Chalk: Just an incredible vibe. A man, a dog, a truck, a delivery to make. A slow drift along a mystical highway cutting through the heartland of America. Pretentious post-modernism for ennui junkies? I don't think so. *Kentucky Route Zero* is a beautiful, moving journey through a world that threatens to become uncomfortably familiar to us all.

80 CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.80

Lincoln Carpenter: A traditional, tile-based roguelike that has a fascination with chrome spindles, transdimensional excretions, and books full of procedural gibberish. It's a game where every run has its own layered, surreal history to uncover and every cave could contain a cybernetic implant that lets you conjure unlimited force knives.



The Top 100

79 BALDUR'S GATE 2

TOP 100 SCORE 224.13

Joshua Wolens: Not many games can boast what *Baldur's Gate* can: every entry in the series is unalloyed gold, and this 24-year-old game can still hold its own against its feted successor from last year. Clever, epic, and with a power curve nothing has matched before or since, this is still a must-play.

78 ARMORED CORE 6

TOP 100 SCORE 224.32

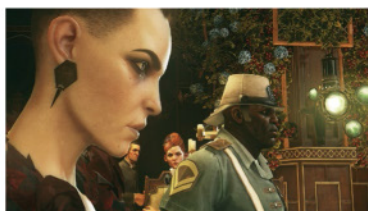
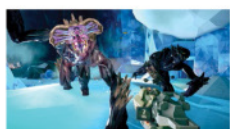
Wes Fenlon: Blends mecha cool, sci-fi dystopia and vast build variety into From's most straightforward action game.

Harvey Randall: A game brave enough to ask: what if FromSoftware didn't make you pay to upgrade weapons or respec? Turns out: a ton of great stuff.

77 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

TOP 100 SCORE 224.73

Robin Valentine: There are a lot of co-op games these days, but few force you to truly cooperate like *Deep Rock Galactic* does. Each player is armed with their own distinctive set of tools – only by combining them in creative ways do you have a chance of making your way through the caverns.



76 DISHONORED 2

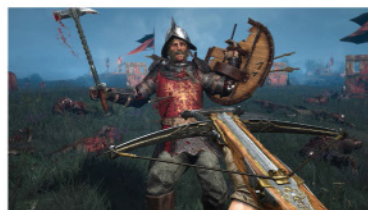
RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.25

Fraser Brown: Ignore the number – *Dishonored 2* will always be a top 10 game. Arkane's gift to humanity is the pinnacle of stealthy sandboxes: freakishly flexible, devilishly smart, and god damn is it a looker, with a bold art direction that's refusing to age. I broke my rule about not responding to emails on holiday to make sure this bad boy stayed on the list.

75 CHIVALRY 2

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Tyler Wilde: This multiplayer medieval warfare game is both extremely unserious – there's a key dedicated to shouting and you can beat enemies to death with flaming chickens – and 100% serious, with well-designed melee combat that gives outnumbered sword fighters a chance if they're skilled enough (and some are). It's the perfect combo of sweaty and silly.



74

MAX PAYNE

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Quality 8.55

Importance 7.83

Hotness 4.17

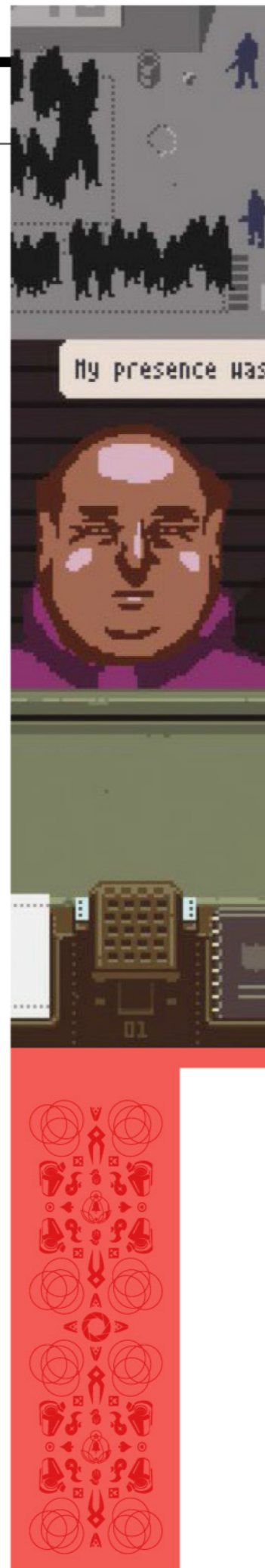
Playability 5.73

Jake Tucker: *Max Payne* lit a fire inside me like a bottle of hot sauce poured down my throat, a time when I talked like a half-baked noir character and wondered if it would be faster to get everywhere by shootdodging instead of the walking I'd done up until that point.

Payne, emblazoned with the ever-grimacing mug of Remedy creative director Sam Lake, is a trauma-ridden cop having the worst night of his life, and by the time it's done you'll have killed every mook in New York in a series of

brutal and frenetic firefights. It's a dumb '90s action movie in videogame form, but you'll smile through every second.

Andy Chalk: I don't think *Max Payne* has held up very well over the years – James McCaffrey's voice acting seems particularly flat compared to his later work – but the game that gave us bullet time, Dick Justice, and some of the best faux-noir quotes in videogame history will always be a favourite in my book. "He was trying to buy more sand for his hourglass. I wasn't selling any."



requested.



73

PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.19

Quality 8.21 Importance 7.78 Hotness .22 Playability 7.80

Harvey Randall: One of the few games I've played that actually makes choosing to suck at it a mechanic itself. *Papers, Please* plays with the space of failure in games – often a mere punishment – and asks you just how many hits you're willing to take to preserve goodness in a drab and heartless world.

Fraser Brown: Look, it's just fun to be really depressed and perform menial tasks under the yoke of an authoritarian regime. Hang on a minute... no it's not. Yet *Papers, Please* remains exceptional – one of those special indie games that forever changed the texture of videogames.



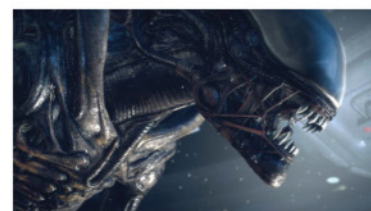
72

CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.05

Wes Fenlon: After *Phantom Liberty*, *Cyberpunk 2.0* deserves even higher placement! I bounced off it completely at launch, but found myself fully immersed in Night City last year. The reworked RPG skill trees thread wonderfully into different combat styles. The way mocapped characters lean against walls or constantly move in cutscenes is so stunning I even accept having to hear the word 'choom' ad infinitum.

Joshua Wolens: Sticking Keanu Reeves' angry, angsty ghost in your head is the best idea CDPR ever had. Johnny Silverhand makes *Cyberpunk* for me, and your developing friendship with him takes it from 'great RPG' to 'personal all-timer'.



71

ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.29

Rich Stanton: The only Alien game ever made where I am actually scared of the Alien, and a perfect corrective to Hollywood's mismanagement of the series. This was a labour of love for its developers, and that shines through in the bravery of building the whole thing around one Alien, and an environment that actually feels like a lived-in and functional space station.

PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

Neverwinter Nights is an endless RPG feast: the 7/10 base game from 2002 has nostalgia value for me, but that's just the beginning. In 2003 we got two expansions that formed a single fantastic fantasy campaign, while the real *NwN* is a staggering library of user-made campaigns and MMO servers that take advantage of one of the best RPG builders ever made.

PERSONAL PICK

Elie Gould



CULT OF THE LAMB

I actually petitioned for *Overwatch 2* to be in this list, but then Blizzard nerfed Ana for what felt like the eleventh time this year so I've switched gears to *Cult of the Lamb*. This roguelite crusade clicks with me for so many reasons, the art's cool, the fights are epic, and I'm a self-admitted people pleaser so the cult management aspect of the game is just *chef's kiss*.

70

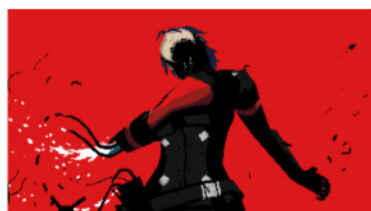
STRANGE HORTICULTURE

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.30

Quality 9.00 Importance 5.75 Hotness 5.25 Playability 8.50

Jody Macgregor: There's a mystery subgenre about detectives with unrelated day jobs – a retired cop who runs a restaurant, a pair of gardeners, etc. *Strange Horticulture* is that, only you've inherited a plant shop where half

the mystery is what the unlabelled flowers are. While solving that you're roped into a mystery with poisonings and druid rituals that can conveniently be solved by someone who has become an expert in occult botany.



69 SIGNALIS

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.30

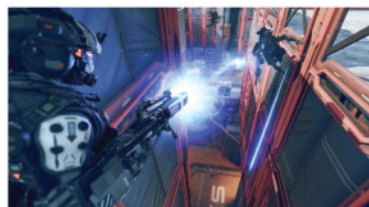
Tyler Colp: A grimy, psychological horror game that looks a lot like an old *Resident Evil*. Although it may feel small, its world is vast and surreal and an unforgettably haunting setting.

Jody Macgregor: When a horror series goes sci-fi it's usually not good. And yet, even though *Signalis* is essentially the *Silent Hill* equivalent of Leprechaun 4: In Space, it's a masterpiece.

68 TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.35

Jake Tucker: *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is a selection box of fantastic FPS ideas. Every level does something new with the theme or mechanics, sparking the sort of curiosity and joy usually reserved for Nintendo games. The timey wimey fun of *Effect and Cause* is popular enough to give the level its own Wikipedia entry, and the game is littered with shining ideas like this.



67

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.66

Quality 7.92

Importance 7.73

Hotness 5.82

Playability 7.36

Wes Fenlon: *Monster Hunter Rise* is called the 'anime bullshit' *Monster Hunter*, and even with my extremely high anime BS tolerance I prefer the weightier *World*, which emphasises the natural ecosystem and doesn't demand I literally herd cats and dogs.

Robin Valentine: *Rise* definitely felt like a throwback, more suited to handheld – on PC, *World* is still the definitive *Monster Hunter* experience, an incredible modernisation of the series that makes its deep and nuanced systems more accessible than they've ever been before. There are few rushes in gaming as intense as bringing down a mighty beast together with your friends.



66

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.77

Phil Savage: Here's a phenomenon I've noticed in Top 100 voting over the years: a disappointing sequel can also ruin the placement of its better, more beloved predecessor. It's almost as if the stink of the sequel's failure taints our perception of a game we once loved. See the lack of *Cities: Skylines* in this year's list as a prime example.

Not *Kerbal Space Program*, though. The early access sequel may be being beasted in the Steam reviews, but the original sandbox space sim is still holding its own. It's still a magnificent, almost perfectly formed playbox – an entertaining engine for physics-driven slapstick and an endlessly enjoyable sandbox for building rockets and trying to fix rocket-based disasters.



65

RUST

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.80

Andy Edser: *Rust* is humanity distilled to its purest components: creativity, paranoia, and brutality. There you'll be, merrily gathering resources for your ramshackle base, only to pause like a fearful gazelle. What was that? A shadow? Must be nothing. Seconds later, gunfire and a fade to black. Your corpse is looted. You have been *Rust*-ed.

64

DIABLO II

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.00

Quality 8.17

Importance 8.75

Hotness 4.75

Playability 6.08

Rich Stanton: I'm not going to say that dungeon-crawling loot 'em ups never got any better than *Diablo II*, but hear me out: maybe they didn't. *Diablo II* is perfectly happy just to let you build a little murder person, and run around with other little murder people spamming the bejesus out of attacks that turn monsters into bloody gibs. And then let you do it again.

Tyler Wilde: The supposedly "dark" *Diablo IV* looks like a video slot machine next to *Diablo II*, which was so literally dark you couldn't see to the edge of the screen. It felt lonely and dangerous.

63

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.05

Elie Gould: After spending half of 2023 complaining about all the uninspired remakes we were getting, *Resident Evil 4 Remake* not only made me look like a fool but completely changed my mind about remakes. It managed to retain most of the original's personality while making sensible improvements – I'm still so happy they got rid of the weird Facetime calls where Saddler and Salazar would just call you an idiot.

Sean Martin: This remake plays exactly how I remember the original. It wasn't until later that I realised quite how much had been added, including new weapons, puzzles, and improved horror sequences, plus even a little shooting gallery where you can earn charms for your gun case.



62

NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.29

Mollie Taylor: Hi, it's me, the person who gushes about this game every dang year. *Nier: Automata* has everything: A gripping story, immaculate post-apocalyptic vibes and a button that lets you explode the skirt off one of the main characters. There's rarely a dull moment, its story beats constantly surprising me or leaving me in suspense.





61 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.69

Elie Gould: I was a bit late to this party as it was released in 2007 when I was seven years old. But having *TF2* as the first real FPS my friends and I played together means it has a very special place in my heart. And now we're finally seeing some action taken against botting, it may even be playable enough for me to enjoy once more.

60 SYSTEM SHOCK REMAKE

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.88

Ted Litchfield: This is the best entry point into the entire *Shock* series in 2024. It may not have *System Shock 2*'s creepy biological horror or *BioShock*'s highfalutin' notions, but it's an incredible first-person shooter whose cyberpunk aesthetic feels fresh even with the genre's overexposure. It's also a masterclass in how to remake a game.



58 FORTNITE

TOP 100 SCORE 227.24

Nick Evanson: It's just a game for kids, right? One for parents to rage about and the media to knock up stories about how it's the doom of humanity. It's none of these things, just a perfectly balanced multiplayer game that's fun, easy to play, and has masses of free content to keep you occupied for hours.

57 THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

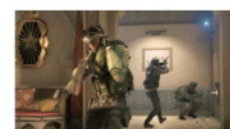
TOP 100 SCORE 227.37

Joshua Wolens: Before the Dragonborn, there was the Nerevarine, on a quest to assassinate a god because a drug addict asked them to. Sometimes broken, often unintuitive, always gloriously strange, *Morrowind* was Bethesda at its most mechanically and narratively ambitious.

56 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

TOP 100 SCORE 227.38

Tyler Wilde: It's buggier than the underside of a log, but Ubisoft's tactical team shooter remains one of my go-to games for casual competition. It leads to great moments when my crew's plans fail or succeed spectacularly, but I also favour *Siege* just for its genuinely low time-to-kill and lethal headshots.



59

UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.10

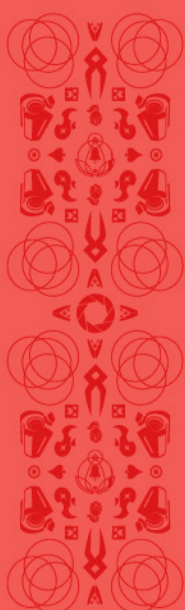
Quality 9.00 Importance 6.67 Hotness 4.67 Playability 8.67

Robin Valentine: A masterful combination of a classic point-and-click adventure with BioWare-style companions and moral choices. It feels like an experiment in how a very old-fashioned genre can be made to feel fresh and relevant, and the result is something really striking that I wish had been more influential than it was.

Its urban fantasy world – where djinn and demons lurk just under the surface of mundane life – is so enthralling, and the perfect setting for a story that

effortlessly weaves between moments of lightness and humour, and truly dark and terrible crimes. That central narrative is bolstered by developer Wadjet Eye's extensive experience creating supernatural mysteries.

Fraser Brown: Play this, then play every Wadjet Eye adventure game, especially the *Blackwell* series. This one's more ambitious, but bickering crime-solvers Rosa and her dead pal Joey get stuck into some exceptional mysteries bolstered by best-in-class puzzles.



55

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.90

Quality 8.08

Importance 8.10

Hotness 5.10

Playability 7.67

Elie Gould: The Binding of Isaac is the kind of love/hate relationship that I look for in all my roguelikes. Its witty writing and gory art set the bar back in 2011, and over a decade later, I'm pressed to find a roguelike I enjoy more.

Robin Valentine: A lot of its humour has aged pretty badly, but its core roguelike mechanics, with their emphasis on discovering new wild and exciting builds every run, are still solid – and it's easy to see how influential they've been on the rest of the genre.



54 WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.97

Harvey Randall: *Vermintide 2* took *Left 4 Dead 2*'s ball and ran with it past the finish line, out the stadium, to touch down on an entirely different court (I don't know sports). An exceptional addition to the core machine that made Valve's work sing.

Wes Fenlon: If you haven't lately, give *Darktide* a chance – it's the new hotness to *Vermintide 2*'s old reliable.



53 CONTROL

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.17

Robin Valentine: Equal parts SCP Foundation and David Lynch, *Control*'s strange and unsettling adventure feels like a real watershed moment for Remedy. One of gaming's most idiosyncratic studios was finally able to get as weird as it wanted on a grand scale, in the process kicking off its own connected universe (laying track for the even better *Alan Wake 2*). The world is definitely the biggest draw – the more you explore the Federal Bureau of Control, learning its secrets and witnessing its wonders and horrors, the more enthralled you become. But there's also plenty of fun to be had in its chaotic, scenery-destroying combat, especially once you earn enough psychic abilities.

PERSONAL PICK

Lauren Morton



THE SIMS 4

I campaigned to get *The Sims 3* on this list, which resulted in no *Sims* on this list, somehow. I will recant my betrayal.

The Sims 4 is a bug-ridden mess at times, but it's still one of my go-to casual creative outlets. Nothing is more relaxing than cluttering up a little kitchen at the weekend. There's a huge audience here starved for options, and until more games like *The Sims* finally launch, this is the best by default.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC SURVIVOR

This 'auto-shooter', heavily inspired by *Vampire Survivors*, has been my new obsession this year. I've played a lot of games in this genre and I genuinely think it's the best of the lot, bringing in ideas from the original *Deep Rock Galactic* and adding new layers of strategy. While battling bugs you're also mastering your environment, digging your way to new paths and defensive positions.

52

WILDERMYTH

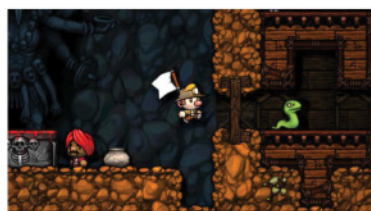
RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.43

Quality 8.57 Importance 6.43 Hotness 4.33 Playability 8.57

Harvey Randall: I only have kind words for *Wilderness – XCOM* rendered as a storybook. Its charming vignettes add just enough flavour to your characters to project all sorts of stories onto them, often dramatically changing

them in the process. It helps that it's a solid tactical RPG, too.

Robin Valentine: I don't think any other game evokes the feel of a rambling tabletop RPG campaign as well as *Wilderness* does (sorry *BG3*).



51 SPELUNKY

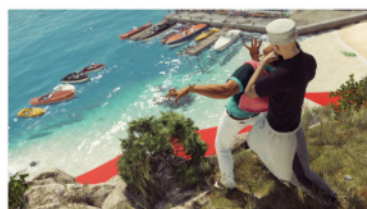
RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.71

Joshua Wolens: The most moreish roguelike ever. I spent much of 2013 one-more-running my way through several hundred hours of *Spelunky*, switching from sheer triumph to utter despair as the game's perfectly honed balance alternated between punishing and uplifting me. The sequel is great, but nothing has ever threaded that difficulty needle like the first game.

50 HITMAN: WORLD OF ASSASSINATION

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.76

Lauren Morton: There's a real joy in a well-built sandbox that *Hitman* evokes over and over with its intricate levels and deep stealth. The answer to "can I kill *this* target in *this* way?" is almost always "yes," but it's more fun finding out how to make it work. This is what keeps me up for hours, never growing bored even as I'm crouched on the second floor of Dartmoor's library.



The Top 100

49 CITIZEN SLEEPER

TOP 100 SCORE 228.79

Jody Macgregor: Half RPG, half visual novel, only instead of an anime hero I'm a synthetic who lives in a shipping container and eats noodles.

Harvey Randall: A beautifully written batch of heartache and nostalgia that's as much about finding a new home as it is letting go.

48 DOOM ETERNAL

TOP 100 SCORE 230.32

Morgan Park: *Doom Eternal* is a minor miracle – a vision of what the FPS would have become if people kept making *Doom* clones well into the 2010s. Id built *Eternal* on the success of the 2016 reboot, with weak spots, platforming and status effects until it landed on a glorious combat loop.

47 FROSTPUNK

TOP 100 SCORE 230.76

Sean Martin: One of the most atmospheric games I've ever played. Whenever I recall it, I can't help but transform into a grizzled Victorian recounting how he survived by eating shoe leather.

Fraser Brown: Easily the most fun I've had accidentally letting urchins freeze to death.



46 INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.01

Wes Fenlon: Chess against monsters, only you choose whether your chess pieces have big guns, laser whips, or cleverer weapons.

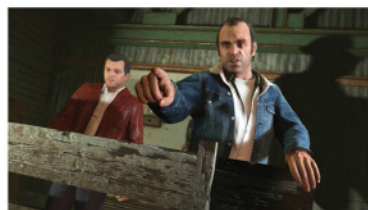
Evan Lahti: The way it expresses difficulty is so special. There are genuine no-win scenarios. The possibility space is perfectly arranged on that 8x8 grid: you have an intuitive sense of what you can do.

45 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.19

Morgan Park: If *GTA VI* is as good as we hope it'll be, this might be one of *GTA V*'s final appearances here. But it's still an all-timer, with memorable missions, characters, and an open world that's just a joy to drive around.

Tyler Wilde: Despite Rockstar's reluctance to fully embrace the PC, it's where *GTA V* has really flourished, especially modded roleplaying servers.



44

DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.22

Quality 8.36

Importance 9.31

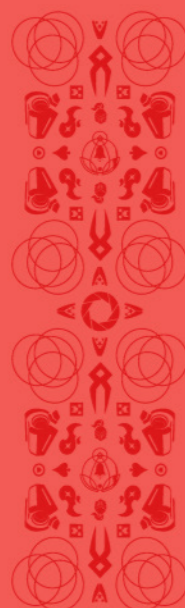
Hotness 4.92

Playability 5.58

Ted Litchfield: One of the most beloved games of all time, and somehow still an underrated work of science fiction. Its more absurd or goofy elements belie a canner understanding of the world than its self-serious 2010s reboot, and I still think *Deus Ex* deserves a *Metal Gear Solid 2*-style reappraisal for what it had to say about surveillance, the internet, and the co-opting of public institutions by private wealth. I'm glad we all agree it has phenomenal gameplay and vibes, though.

Jake Tucker: I like it because it's a science fiction sandbox where you'll feel like a cinematic super-spy that can do everything. As long as that everything involves blowing up a load of robotic government agents with a GEP gun.

Andy Chalk: It looks kind of shitty, the voice acting is terrible, and the story is a barely-coherent mashup of '90s conspiracy nonsense that would make Chris Carter shake his head and leave the room. And it is so great! I do not understand it.



43

ANIMAL WELL

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.30

Quality 8.20 Importance 5.80
Hotness 7.20 Playability 8.40

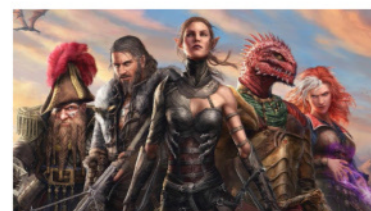
Shaun Prescott: In this post-*Hollow Knight* world it's exceedingly tough to stand out among modern metroidvanias. *Animal Well* adopts the time-worn pleasures of filling out a vast, interconnected map, but replaces increasingly yawn-inducing Soulslike combat with puzzle-solving. That doesn't sound super inspiring as a concept, but the game's success is all in the loving details: the cryptic subterranean ambience, the imsim flexibility of your tools, and – not insignificantly – the fact that the world's secrets go so much deeper than most players will ever realise. Once the credits roll the real *Animal Well* begins, though you're going to need the help of other players to see its end.



42 PREY

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.45

Andy Chalk: I will never not be angry that *Prey* didn't get a sequel. I will never not be angry that Arkane Austin is closed. With all due respect to Phil, I will never not be just a little bit irritated that we scored it a paltry 79% in our review. *Prey* is the real successor to the *System Shock* crown, a game that should have heralded a golden age for the immersive sim genre. Its Talos-1 space station was a joy to explore, tense, terrifying, and believable in equal measure, the deadly Typhon haunting its halls are marvellously alien, and it served up one of the most wonderfully awful 'oh no' endings I've ever been hit with. *Prey* is a great game, and *Prey* deserved better.



41 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.97

Wes Fenlon: It may feel a bit like the pencil sketch of a masterwork, but fantastic characters make it worth playing even after *Baldur's Gate 3*. Especially in co-op.

Lauren Morton: This is the game that proved Larian had the grit and vision to pull off *Baldur's Gate 3*. The sandbox combat, open-ended questing, and irreverent humour are all in here.

PERSONAL PICK

*Rich
Stanton*



BIOSHOCK

I almost feel this fell off the list by accident. The first half of *BioShock* is the most incredible singleplayer FPS experience I've had and, even if it can't quite maintain that stellar quality until the end, this stands proud as one of the most vividly brilliant environments in gaming, packed with over-reaching ideas, a stupendously fun toolkit, and the genius, macabre, haunting threat of the Big Daddies.

PERSONAL PICK

*Jody
Macgregor*



**WARHAMMER
40,000: DAWN
OF WAR**

I'm as disappointed as you that the RTS genre peaked 20 years ago, but it did. *Dawn of War* has just enough base-building to scratch the itch, but instead of having to harvest gas you progress by capturing points – actually playing the game. That leads to conflicts, which look amazing thanks to an embarrassment of sync-kill animations. It's the best.

40

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.69

Quality 8.00

Importance 7.89

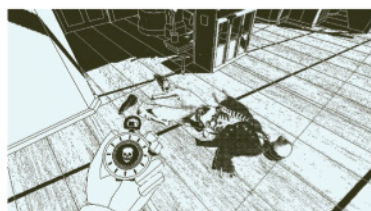
Hotness 6.53

Playability 7.94

Fraser Brown: For a very long time, my Steam Deck was essentially a *Vampire Survivors* machine. It existed purely to fill its screen with gaudy effects and deadly projectiles as I tried to murder death, and anything else in my way. I

lost so much sleep fighting through this bullet hell, and it felt like heaven.

Elie Gould: If you love turning your brain off and fighting the undead as much as I do, then *Vampire Survivors* is a must-play.



39

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.71

Jacob Ridley: Sucked in by the art style of *Obra Dinn*, you'll stick around for the engrossing story. A murder mystery that requires genuine thought and careful consideration to complete, or at the very least partially solve, I found myself hooked for hours, and thinking about it when I wasn't playing. No doubt it's a great pick for a long flight with a Steam Deck or ROG Ally.

38

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.02

Sarah James: While *World of Warcraft* set the standard for MMORPGs, the past 20 years haven't been trouble-free. Thankfully, *Dragonflight* helped steer *WoW* back on course after *Shadowlands*.

Harvey Randall: *The War Within* might pull the game back from the brink.

Fraser Brown: I'm still playing 20 years after I started. Help.





37

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.68

Quality 7.81

Importance 8.93

Hotness 7.00

Playability 7.12

Tyler Wilde: I've never finished *Skyrim's* main quest – blah blah dragonborn, whatever – but the dozens of hours I've spent in this open-world RPG include some of my favourite gaming memories. *Starfield* didn't bring about the same 'I just wanna hang out in this world, maybe become a vampire' feeling, so it isn't just something all sufficiently large Bethesda games possess. *Skyrim's* special.

Mollie Taylor: I continue to be convinced that *Skyrim* is the ultimate comfort game and I won't hear anything otherwise. There's something ultra cosy about mounting a near-vertical cliff on your horse, gentle music playing in the background, and frantically mashing jump in an attempt to climb over the mountain instead of hoofing it around on the path like a normal person.



36 STELLARIS

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.94

Fraser Brown: *Stellaris* attempts to condense every sci-fi fantasy you've ever had into a single grand strategy 4X. A race of eggheads who get taken over by the machines they built, fanatical feudal space empires, nanite swarms, alien hives consuming the entire galaxy – it tries to do everything. Not always successfully, mind, but it's always absurdly ambitious and deft at telling cosmic stories of conquest, intrigue and discovery. It also spawned easily the best *Star Trek* game in the incredible *New Horizons* mod.

Robin Valentine: The game already felt like it covered a huge spectrum of sci-fi ideas back in 2016. So it's been pretty incredible to see how far it's expanded from there.



35 COUNTER-STRIKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.12

Rich Stanton: Valve promised more with CS2 than it has yet delivered, but that means this is merely the best competitive shooter on the planet, with some genuinely new touches like the fancy smoke physics nestling alongside QoL improvements to things like the HUD and Buy menu. CS2 is my favourite shooter by a mile: but this is hopefully just the beginning.

T100P
2024

34

FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.30

Quality 7.63 Importance 8.10 Hotness 8.30 Playability 7.75

Harvey Randall: *Dawntrail* might have floundered on the story, but its actual content so far has been some of the best the game's ever gotten – *A Realm Reborn* to *Endwalker* is one of the best RPG stories out there, and maybe one of my favourite fantasy tales ever. A single dialogue prompt had me ugly-crying. I've given 4,000 hours to this game and I only want a handful back – here's to 4,000 more.

Sarah James: I'm still upset that I don't play this.

Mollie Taylor: *FFXIV* remains the only game that has managed to squeeze quadruple playtime digits. I may have taken a break during *Endwalker* but I'm fully back on the *Dawntrail* train. The dungeons and raids this expansion have been a blast so far, and I can only see it getting better from here.

33 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.75

Jody Macgregor: Like everyone else, the *Fallout* TV show made me want to replay the *Fallout* games. To my surprise, I didn't enjoy returning to the original. The way you could avoid fights with a high Speech skill was groundbreaking at the time, but too often it just meant bad guys saying, "For some reason, I believe you," then QUEST COMPLETE. Meanwhile, *New Vegas* includes a scene where your brain gets removed and replaced by a computer and you have to talk it into returning to your skull because it's enjoying this Brain Brexit where it gets to stay in a jar that doesn't get shot at every five minutes, unlike your head, which does. So yeah, *New Vegas* is the *Fallout* I recommend playing today.



32 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.88

Lauren Morton: The *Yakuza* series is all about street toughs ripping their shirts off, smacking each other with traffic cones, stopping to do some disco dance minigames, and then imparting lessons about friendship. And this prequel with its '80s glamour and fresh-faced protagonists is still the best entry point thanks to a heart-wrenching main story.





31 STARCRAFT 2

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.18

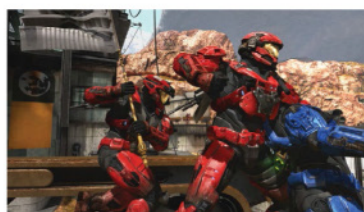
Rich Stanton: I ended up losing years of my gaming life to the competitive side of SC2. Nothing compares to its constant juggle of macro and micro, triumph and panic, fear and glory: that sense of a true one-on-one matchup that tests every skill you both have and, win or lose, somehow always ends with a "GG". The best competitive RTS there has ever been.

30 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.50

Wes Fenlon: I'm tempted to play *Halo Infinite*'s finally-good multiplayer, but it can't beat the package of nearly every prior *Halo* campaign and multiplayer put together, with custom game browsers and modding support.

Elie Gould: This deserves recognition for bringing my favourite (and the best) *Halo* game of all time, *Halo Reach*, to PC.



28 THIEF GOLD

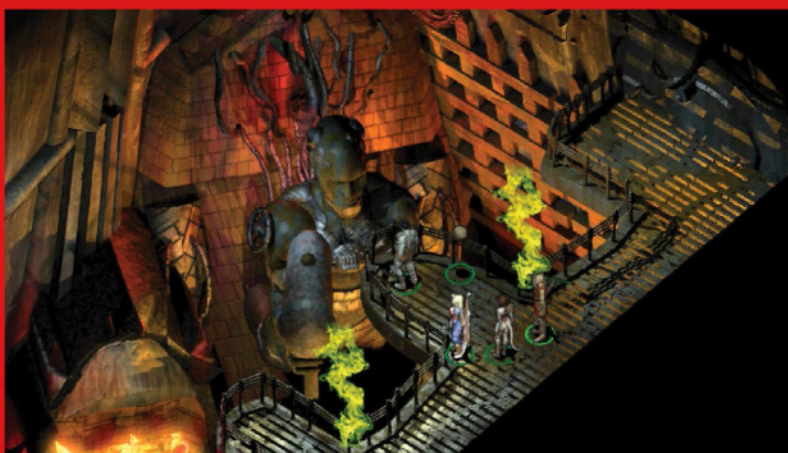
TOP 100 SCORE 236.49

Andy Chalk: *Thief* is the one game that will make me grab you by the collar and scream, "Play it on expert or stop wasting your time!" That's the essence of *Thief*: if you want the real game – and I mean that literally, not just in a "you cheated yourself" sense – you have to jump into the deep end.

27 HUNT: SHOWDOWN

TOP 100 SCORE 236.76

Morgan Park: You bet our favourite extraction shooter made the list. *Hunt: Showdown* is in a transition phase as Crytek prepares to move the game to a newer engine, but we're still playing and loving this one-of-a-kind cowboy shooter weekly, and enjoying its expanding arsenal of 19th century guns.



29

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.43

Quality 9.14 Importance 7.71 Hotness 4.14 Playability 6.17

Jody Macgregor: *Torment* took the engine *Baldur's Gate* was built on, but stripped out the trad fantasy trappings. Instead of drinking healing potions you get hit points back by eating blood flies and the available weapons include a severed limb and upgradeable teeth for your companion, who is just a skull. *Torment* is *Dungeons & Dragons* minus the elves and gnomes, plus the maddest shit you've ever heard.

Joshua Wolens: *Disco Elysium* before there was *Disco Elysium*. Thoughtful,

gorgeous, and with some of the best boss dialogue in gaming history. Shame about the actual boss battles, eh? Turn the difficulty down low and enjoy it as the visual novel it's meant to be.

Ted Litchfield: Cerebral RPGs of this vintage loved self-sabotaging with the most filler combat you've ever seen, but *Torment* makes it worth your while. My favourite moment is paying off a bar tab to get back your eyeball from a past life before doing some impromptu ocular surgery.

26 PIZZA TOWER

TOP 100 SCORE 237.00

Ted Litchfield: It's hard to get excited about a new 2D platformer: they've been done. But *Pizza Tower* shows there's still magic to be had in the genre. Every level surprises you with a gimmick that could support a full game, while the '90s Cartoon Network art and Dreamcast-y soundtrack are killer.



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2024

25

CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.10

Quality 8.50

Importance 7.18

Hotness 6.10

Playability 8.11

Fraser Brown: It may have fallen down the list a wee bit, but Paradox's irrepressible anecdote generator is still at the top in my heart. Even the less celebrated DLCs have given me an excuse to come back, adding plagues and propaganda masquerading as legends, but the core of this medieval grand strategy RPG is so wonderful that I really don't need many reasons for frequent revisits. Where else will I get to plot the assassination of my brother while I'm participating in a jousting tournament and hooking up with a Satanist who is also my tax collector? It's certainly never boring.



24 PORTAL

RELEASED 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.53

Tyler Wilde: Call it baby bear porridge, because Valve's first-person puzzle classic is just right: just long enough to thoroughly explore its brain-twisting physics concept, with just the right frequency of gags to keep it funny for the whole duration – and I think that's still true today, when most internet comedy from the '00s seems unbearably corny.



23 SEKIRO:
SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.87

Wes Fenlon: This game is full of beautiful dualities. Patient stealth is followed by arterial-blood-spraying executions. It demands true mastery of the sword and parry timings, yet also allows you to cheese bosses with an umbrella. At one point you fight a giant ape, and then – get this – another ape shows up. My actual favourite FromSoft game.

Harvey Randall: *Shadows Die Twice* is such a focused game. In your typical soulslike, FromSoftware has to account for a glut of builds – but not so here. The studio knows what tools you have, and with that knowledge is able to craft some all-timer boss fights that have barely seen competition since.



22

HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.06

Quality 8.08

Importance 7.92

Hotness 7.50

Playability 7.73

Kara Phillips: I didn't think much of metroidvanias before going into *Hollow Knight*, but I quickly found a home in Hallowenest. One of the only games to drive me to pure fury during a boss fight, it still had me coming back to try again.

Plus, it's got an incredible soundtrack that never loses its charm no matter how many times you listen to it.

Harvey Randall: Proof that a game can have a lot of bugs in it and still be really good.



PERSONAL PICK

Joshua Wolens



ALPHA PROTOCOL

I fought hard to get AP on the top 100 this year (there was even a PowerPoint), but the PCG deep state conspired against me. Okay, fine, I'll cop to parts of the gameplay being downright busted – woe betide anyone who doesn't spec into pistols and stealth – but Obsidian's espionage RPG still does choice and consequence like no other game can, and the fact we never got a sequel that fixed its missteps is a crime.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW

Mimimi's final game is also the peak of the tactical stealth formula the dev has been honing since 2016's *Shadow Tactics*. Here you control a crew of ghost pirates, using their spooky powers to infiltrate islands. Slowly working through the complex guard patrols is as satisfying as ever, but the real joy is in testing out new squad combos and seeing how their unique powers interact.



21 ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.87

Elie Gould: Just when I thought I'd seen it all, *Alan Wake 2* dropped in to show me all the new ways in which a horror game can scare me. But I'd do it all again just to see all the mind-bending cutscenes.

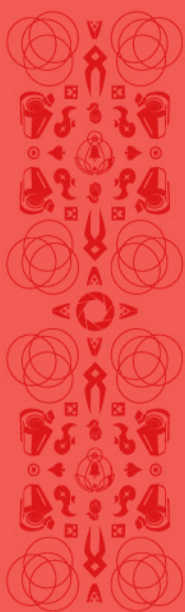
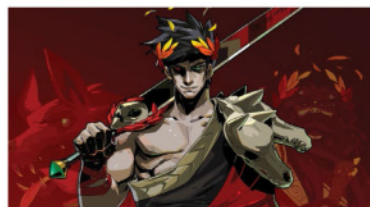
Robin Valentine: I voluntarily stayed in a movie theatre in this game to watch a live-action short horror film entirely in Finnish and loved every minute of it.

20 HADES

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 240.27

Harvey Randall: It's hard to overstate the impact *Hades* had on the roguelike genre – not only is it some of Supergiant's finest work, it also proves that you can tell a strong narrative in a game that ends every time you die.

Elie Gould: After devoting countless hours and all three of my brain cells, I can safely say that all the pain was worth it.



19 SLAY THE SPIRE

TOP 100 SCORE 240.29

Harvey Randall: I have 276 hours logged in Slay the Spire. I regret none of them.

Robin Valentine:

These days I try pretty much every roguelike deckbuilder going, and I have to say, there's still very few that beat this foundational game. Only Balatro has felt as fresh – more on that further down the list.

18 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY

TOP 100 SCORE 240.61

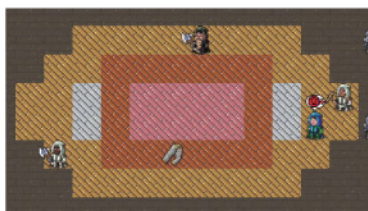
Jody Macgregor: When *Mass Effect* released it confused people who thought it was a shooter with too much talking. It was rare to have competent combat in an RPG back then, or to have one that felt this much like watching TV rather than reading a book. Your favourite sci-fi show: the game.

17 RIMWORLD

TOP 100 SCORE 241.36

Natanael Albuquerque:

If you're into min-max automation games, you'll love simulating an oversized money printer with turrets guarding against super soldiers. And for those of us who prefer life simulation and crafting unique stories, watching your colony implode is a special kind of thrill.



16 DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.0

Wes Fenlon: The Steam version of this mantle-deep colony sim now features the underappreciated Adventure mode, a roguelike RPG that lets you venture forth into the world you generated for your fortress. You could play as a dwarf, but why, when being a cockatiel man is on the table? Beyond that addition, *Dwarf Fortress* remains the Platonic ideal of storytelling.

15 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.20

Kara Phillips: The adult equivalent of playing pretend cowboys, except it will emotionally destroy you. It's also a great wildlife-watching/foraging game if you ignore all the outlaws and guns, and the emotional turmoil.

Sean Martin: I'm still distraught Rockstar stopped supporting Red Dead Online; nothing beat pretending to be a cowpoke with pals.



14

HELLDIVERS 2

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 245.18

Quality 8.13 Importance 8.25 Hotness 8.24 Playability 8.20

Harvey Randall: Arrowhead has a lot of stuff to figure out – namely, how it'll handle all eyes being on it going forward – but *Helldivers 2* remains an absolute triumph in every way that matters. Being a scrappy little trooper in a hellscape of blood, metal and acid is almost always a riot.

Sean Martin: Before *Helldivers 2*, my peak co-op shooter was *Deep Rock Galactic*, and though I still have a fondness for space dwarves, fighting a never-ending galactic war has won me

over. From its sleek stratagems to its packed-sandboxes, *Helldivers 2* really is a must for any fan of co-op shooters and egregious friendly fire.

Jake Tucker: As an Arrowhead fan since *Magicka*, seeing *Helldivers 2* explode has been a joy. Arrowhead's classic DNA is here: failure is fun, and sometimes you'll fail accidentally on purpose to see what a bomb does to your comrades.

Morgan Park: *Helldivers 2* is my game of the year so far, and I'd be amazed if anything beats it.



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13

XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.21 | PROMOTED BY Robin Valentine

Quality 8.61

Importance 7.53

Hotness 5.56

Playability 7.76

Robin Valentine: I had to fight to keep *XCOM 2* this high on the list, but by god it deserves it. Eight years on, after countless imitators, it's still the king of the tactical strategy genre and honestly it isn't even close. It ages like fine wine – still feels great to go back to, and only generates more and more amazing mod content to ensure you've always got something new to see. I've keenly felt the absence of a proper *XCOM 3* or even a worthy successor, but it's hard to be too sad when I can just boot this up and have as much fun as ever.

12

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 3

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.60

Sean Martin: In a genre as hit-and-miss as the RTS, *Total War: Warhammer* continues to thrive as one of the best *Total War* games and a menagerie of all-round fantasy goodness. *Immortal Empires* has become the de facto way to play; a grand campaign combining all three games' races and maps. Since you only need *Total War: Warhammer 3* to play *Immortal Empires* now, it's exceptional value, letting you face off against three games' worth of content.

Jody Macgregor: It's been argued games like *Devil May Cry* should be called spectacle fighters. When daemonic leather freaks fight lizards riding dinosaurs, *Warhammer 3* approaches spectacle strategy.



11

METAL GEAR SOLID 3 – MASTER COLLECTION

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.76

Joshua Wolens: The simplest *Metal Gear Solid* story is also the series' best. *MGS3* swaps the second game's conga line of twists (mostly) for a Cold War spy tragedy about a man on a quest to kill the person he loves most in the world, and chucks in some peerless boss fights along the way. A halfhearted PC port, sure, but its greatness shines through anyway.

PERSONAL PICK

Sean Martin



DARK SOULS 3

So, you like *Elden Ring* and want to try out *Dark Souls*? Don't go back to the first game; go to the third. *Elden Ring* owes its greatness to the culmination of the *Souls* series, and besides having FromSoftware's best DLC it still plays well today. Perfect if you're already well versed in *Elden Ring*'s combat and want a new challenge to undertake.

PERSONAL PICK

Morgan Park



HALO INFINITE

I failed to lobby for *Halo Infinite* to make the list this year, despite its multiplayer finally getting really good. I've put nearly 150 years into the game since last year, and almost all of that time has been spent enjoying its huge variety of modes and maps. The map pool, in particular, has exploded with original and throwback maps created by the Forge community.

10

DOOM (1993)

RELEASED 1993 | TOP 100 SCORE 247.51

Quality 8.41

Importance 10.0

Hotness 6.81

Playability 6.81

Wes Fenlon: The purity of *Doom*'s shooting and serpentine levels appropriately earned it one of only two perfect scores for Importance this year. How could you rate it anything less? The real reason to play *Doom* today is its

mod scene, which is still cranking out masterpieces 30 years later (play *Myhouse.wad!*). Most modders build on *Doom 2*, so consider this a vote for the duo: both still belong on any PC (or printer, or pregnancy test) in 2024.



9

STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 248.03

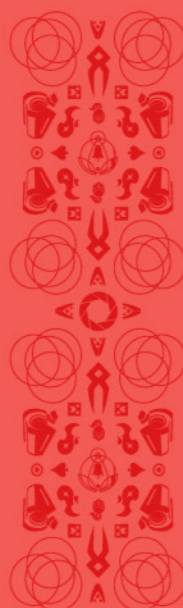
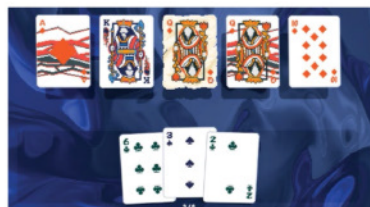
Kara Phillips: Serving as the ruler of all farming simulators, *Stardew Valley* deserves a top-ten spot. Eight years after its launch the game is more popular than ever, welcoming well-versed farmers and entirely new players with open arms. And, with the scale of updates still being rolled out, even after hundreds of hours I still find new things to love about it.

8

BALATRO

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 254.82

Robin Valentine: I was starting to think *Slay the Spire*'s reign was never going to end, but I think *Balatro* might genuinely have taken its place in my heart. On the surface it appears so unassuming, but you soon realise it's using those simple playing cards as the basis for adventures as wild and tense and mind-bending as any more fantastical deckbuilder.



7

HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 256.61

Quality 9.10 Importance 9.53 Hotness 6.00 Playability 7.65

Phil Savage: It's nearly two decades old, but *Half-Life 2* is still one of the best FPS campaigns ever made. There are plenty of shooters with better feeling guns, or more exciting combat, but all too few have learned the important lessons about variety and pace taught by Valve's all-timer. Each level is a classic, exploring different ideas to memorable effect – finding fun new uses for the tools it provides.

And the legacy of *Half-Life 2* extends beyond the games that have tried (and often failed) to imitate it. Its mod scene was responsible for entirely new genres – total conversions like *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* showcasing new ways to tell videogame stories.

6 THE WITCHER 3

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 257.66

Ted Litchfield: It was one of those gamer forum stereotypes: "Why don't they just put the good writing and stuff from BioWare games in an open world like *Skyrim*?" But then CD Projekt Red went and did it. The studio somehow pushed the envelope on cinematic storytelling while filling out a vast and engrossing open world. Even as Larian breaks new ground in open-ended reactivity, CDPR remains the top dog in the BioWare-style action RPG.

Andy Chalk: I waited years to play *The Witcher 3* because after the first two games – which I loved – I knew my time with it had to be perfect. And it was: a sublime, satisfying conclusion to one of the greatest videogame adventures of all time.



5 PERSONA 5 ROYAL

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 258.38

Phil Savage: An effortlessly stylish JRPG. *Persona 5* is the standout of Atlus's unique blend of high-school life sim and turn-based dungeon crawler. It's bolder and more brash, but the real improvement is to combat. Bring the right squad, and you'll feel absurdly powerful, wiping out your foes before they even get a chance to respond.

T100



4

MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 258.50

Quality 8.57

Importance 9.95

Hotness 7.70

Playability 8.26

Kara Phillips: For a game that's all about stacking blocks, *Minecraft* is unmatched in holding its charm and the attention of its players. The creativity of the community helps make the experience whole.

Lauren Morton: *Minecraft* deserves its place on this list for still being so all-round good. There's no debating its importance – we have it to thank for the flourishing survival crafting genre. And though it's not as hot as it once was, it remains a household name I can use to explain to non-gaming adults what I do for a living.

3

ELDEN RING

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 259.81

Quality 8.68

Importance 8.65

Hotness 9.17

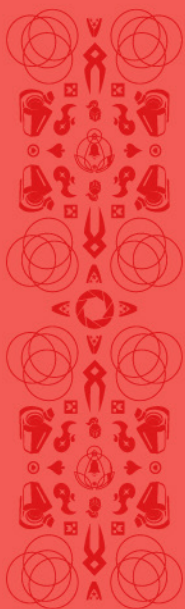
Playability 7.77

Fraser Brown: FromSoftware at its most audacious and unrestrained, *Elden Ring* is the pinnacle of the genre the studio created. With the huge *Shadow of the Erdtree* expansion, it's now effectively two interconnected games, and both will ruin your life.

Elie Gould: I can't remember the last time I dedicated every waking moment to a game and didn't get bored, even when hunting invisible turtles.

Ted Litchfield: I've beaten it three times, coming up on two clears of the expansion, and there's no end in sight. There are so many characters and builds I want to try, I want to beat NG+ with my first dude, I just started a Seamless Co-op run. You know what might help me move on? A *Bloodborne* PC port.





Two cops and a body. So far, so conventional.

2

DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 264.84

Quality 9.29

Importance 9.14

Hotness 6.60

Playability 8.95

Ted Litchfield: In People Make Games' documentary about the fracturing of developer ZA/UM and the legal battle for ownership of *Disco Elysium*, one of the game's writers, Argo Tuulik, said that setting creator Robert Kurvitz "has this uncanny ability to conceptualise things that already exist in a way that they seem completely fresh and new".

That's one of my favourite things about this RPG: it's somehow pressing, anarchic and punk while also feeling measured, mournful, almost anthropological in its fictional history. It's a world with its own physics and technology, but the same political philosophies as our own, with a bizarre alternate world war and looming ecological

catastrophe that make you look at our real ones with fresh eyes. And all that's just set dressing!

It's always felt bitterly ironic that *Disco Elysium's* success should prove as ambiguous, melancholy, and charged with issues of class and politics as anything in the game itself.

Joshua Wolens: Still #1 in my heart. *Disco Elysium* is a game about the return of history after the long

tenure of grey moderate men in grey moderate clothes. The revolution died, the communards were lined up and shot, and for a while it really felt like everything could be administered by market forces in perpetuity. History is over; the handbrake is on.

Except whoops! History has no handbrake. It was only by quiet and colossal violence that the pleasant technocrats of the world gummed up the wheels enough to keep the locomotive in place for a few decades. *Disco Elysium* takes place when that violence is boiling over into the streets, tearing the old order apart and giving rise to something new. It's a miracle we even got one game this good, in this setting, from these people.

A BIZARRE ALTERNATE WORLD WAR AND LOOMING CATASTROPHE



...but there's very little else that's conventional here.

T1000
20



1

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 275.95

Quality 9.24

Importance 9.38

Hotness 9.07

Playability 8.86

Fraser Brown: I mean, of course it's *Baldur's Gate 3*, right? *Disco Elysium's* incredible run at the top of this list had to end eventually, and when *BG3* launched last year I knew this would be the giant slayer.

BG3 is so much more than a game we've waited decades for – especially since it's really a sequel in name only. It stands on its own at the top of RPG Mountain, propped up by Larian's years of experimentation in the *Divinity* series and the huge legacy of tabletop role-playing games. The result: the most RPG of all RPGs, boasting the kind of freedom you only get with extremely permissive DMs, but with the kind of writing and world-building and character development that you only get with a best-in-class team of scribes.

Harvey Randall: In an era when every RPG has a parry, dodge roll, and conversation wheel (except for *Disco Elysium* but hey, look what's at #2) Larian has well and truly trounced the idea that tactical CRPGs are a thing of the past.

It helps that it's a gorgeously-written, acted, and presented game. Companion characters are

vibrantly voiced, beautifully performed, and meticulously animated. I already adored my first journey through the Sword Coast, and then Larian went ahead and updated the dang thing – adding an epilogue that turned a slightly wonky final few minutes into a heartfelt love letter to my investment in its story.

BG3 IS SO MUCH MORE THAN A GAME WE'VE WAITED DECADES FOR

Ted Litchfield: The thing that sticks with me the most about *Baldur's Gate 3* one year later is that it never compromises, and in doing so upends 20 years of received wisdom from RPG fans and devs. Depth vs approachability, reactivity vs production values, mass appeal vs RPG sicko appeal. Even people who love complicated, deep CRPGs seemed to take it as given that they'd never sell well, that the

things we want from them limit their audience.

In the last five years, we've seen two of the best to ever do it in *Disco Elysium* and *Baldur's Gate 3*. Both games blew all expectations about their sales and popular impact out of the water. I'd always felt like I missed the party on CRPGs, that no matter how good the new ones might be, classics from 20 years ago would never be beaten. It's been wonderful to be proven wrong.

Tyler Wilde: I also love how uncompromising it is, even when it refuses to compromise on things that aren't worth defending. D&D 5e definitely doesn't have the greatest tabletop combat system ever invented, yet *Baldur's Gate 3* goes to absurd lengths to replicate it faithfully. The audacity is part of the fun. If you're a D&D player, it's satisfying to find things working the way you know, even if it means disregarding contemporary notions of 'good videogame design,' and if you're not a D&D player, you get to experience an approximation of freeform tabletop combat and credibly complain about D&D's combat rules – metamorphosis!



CATEGORICALLY CORRECT

You've seen the full list, but who were the big winners in our individual voting categories?

QUALITY SIMPLY THE TEAM'S FAVOURITE GAMES		
POSITION	GAME	QUALITY SCORE
1	DISCO ELYSIUM	9.29
2	BALDUR'S GATE 3	9.24
3	PLANESCAPE: TORMENT	9.14
4	HALF-LIFE 2	9.10
5	THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	9.08

IMPORTANCE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL IN PC GAMING HISTORY		
POSITION	GAME	QUALITY SCORE
1=	DOOM (1993)	10
1=	WORLD OF WARCRAFT	10
3	MINECRAFT	9.95
4	HALF-LIFE 2	9.53
5	FORTNITE	9.47

HOTNESS THE MOST EXCITING AND RELEVANT GAMES AROUND		
POSITION	GAME	QUALITY SCORE
1	ELDEN RING	9.17
2	BALDUR'S GATE 3	9.07
3	FINAL FANTASY XIV	8.30
4	HELLDIVERS 2	8.24
5	COUNTER-STRIKE 2	8.22

PLAYABILITY HOW WELL DOES IT PLAY TODAY?		
POSITION	GAME	QUALITY SCORE
1	DISCO ELYSIUM	8.95
2	BALATRO	8.94
3	BALDUR'S GATE 3	8.86
4	RESIDENT EVIL REMAKE	8.75
5	UNAVOWED	8.67

PC GAMER

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